

# On Spec

more than just science fiction

FALL 1998

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- Hazel Hutchins
- Eileen Kernaghan
- Hugh A.D. Spencer

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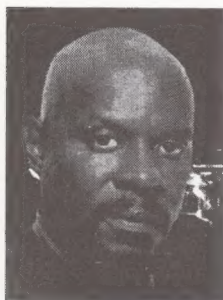
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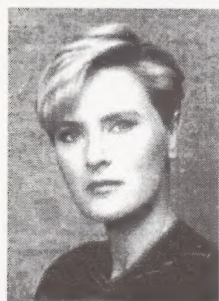
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# On·Spec

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Fall 1998

## FICTION

|                                    |                         |     |
|------------------------------------|-------------------------|-----|
| The Sorcerer's Wife .....          | Edo van Belkom .....    | 6   |
| art by James Beveridge             |                         |     |
| ...And the Retrograde Mentor ..... | Hugh A.D. Spencer ..... | 14  |
| art by James Beveridge             |                         |     |
| Blind Date .....                   | David Chato .....       | 22  |
| art by Ronn Sutton                 |                         |     |
| All That Matters .....             | Robyn Herrington .....  | 32  |
| art by Warren Layberry             |                         |     |
| Alexandrite .....                  | Shirley Barr .....      | 44  |
| art by Lynne Taylor Fahnestalk     |                         |     |
| Soaps .....                        | Hazel Hutchins .....    | 50  |
| art by Adrian Kleinbergen          |                         |     |
| Wild Thing .....                   | Randy Barnhart .....    | 60  |
| art by Murray Lindsay              |                         |     |
| Flatworms .....                    | Carol Thomas .....      | 72  |
| art by Peter Francis               |                         |     |
| Always Been the Special One .....  | Leah Silverman .....    | 76  |
| art by Mark Savona                 |                         |     |
| A Valediction .....                | Leslie Brown .....      | 90  |
| art by Warren Layberry             |                         |     |
| The Vergers: First Story .....     | fiona heath .....       | 102 |
| art by James Beveridge             |                         |     |

## POETRY

|                       |                        |    |
|-----------------------|------------------------|----|
| Myths of Winter ..... | Eileen Kernaghan ..... | 31 |
| Wild Things .....     | Eileen Kernaghan ..... | 43 |

## ART

|                   |                               |    |
|-------------------|-------------------------------|----|
| On the edge ..... | Lynne Taylor Fahnestalk ..... | 89 |
|-------------------|-------------------------------|----|

## NONFICTION

|   |                               |     |
|---|-------------------------------|-----|
| Risk and faith.....                       | Susan MacGregor .....         | 3   |
| Congratulations to the nominees! .....    | 1998 Prix Aurora Awards ..... | 59  |
| Sending your work to <i>On Spec</i> ..... | Guidelines .....              | 101 |

## COVER

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*more than just science fiction*

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On this issue...

## Risk and faith...

Susan MacGregor

*One of the perks of being an editor is that now and then, you get to promote your own interests, plug your own work. Of course, readers can always tune you out by turning the page, but you hope they won't. With the September 1998 release of *Divine Realms* (Turnstone Press), the spiritual SF anthology I put together three years ago (which includes stories from 17 writers from across Canada and the US), I imposed myself upon my fellow editors and asked if I could write the fall editorial on spiritual SF. Over and above all that, this piece is also about having faith and taking risks.*

Initially, when I thought of putting together an SF anthology which explored spiritual themes, I rejected the idea. To do so would mean coming out of the spiritual closet, of taking a stand for what I believed was worthwhile. I didn't want to be stereotyped as "one of those" by the SF community who, I thought, shunned anything smacking of the religious or spiritual. Since then, I've been proved wrong any number of times with the release of books such as *The Golden Compass* by Phillip Pullman, or *Good Omens: The Nice and Accurate Prophecies of Agnus Nutter, Witch*, by Terry Pratchett and Neil Gaiman. And I'm glad of it. Nothing should be considered taboo in SF, including spirituality or religion.

As a result of my interest in spiritual SF (word somehow gets out about these things), *On Spec* has received more manuscripts that explore such themes than we've ever had before. My fellow editors blame me for that. I have my own biases about spiritual work—what works and what doesn't, and why I would choose one story over another.

What I look for in any manuscript, spiritual SF notwithstanding, is an honest sense of exploration. This doesn't mean that the manuscript needs to be innocent; I'd say that usually, the less innocent a piece is, the more we, as an editorial collective, like it. But I want *real*, in the sense that emotions and ideas and situations are presented honestly. The other thing that I look for is *growth*. Either

the main character grows or learns something from his experience, or I do, as the reader. Tell me something I haven't considered before. Give me something to ponder. Remind me of what I know, but have forgotten. Show me what we have in common, confirm for me that I'm not alone—or that we, as writer and reader, are not—even if we don't understand how it all works. I don't necessarily need the answers, but I *do* need to consider the questions. On the other hand, if you *do* have some answers, fine. Share them with me. But leave me to make up my own mind. Don't insist I believe what you do, or hit me over the head with your beliefs. Ultimately, what I'm looking for is a glimpse of what may be part of a greater reality, of the kind of stuff that goes bump in the night, taps us on the shoulder when we're least expecting it, makes us wonder—*Could it be possible? What just happened here? Or, Where have I been?*

I admit to a bias. I don't like nihilistic stories, particularly if their theme centres on religious or spiritual characters or ideas. Although I may not completely subscribe to traditional practices, I don't like to discredit them with "it's all a delusion, you poor, sad fools" put-downs. *We're all gonna die, and nobody gives a shit or We're all gonna die, and God planned it that way just to make us miserable* stories don't work for me at all. Nor do stories in which religious figures are portrayed in such a way as to generate shock. In fact, I tend to throw those at the wall and score them with nines or tens (five being the lowest we score stories at *On Spec*). A lack of respect

is just a cheap shot. It's easy to be cynical. It's harder to present stories that attempt to make sense out of the greater reality out there, what lies beyond what we ordinarily experience with our five limited senses.

Conversely, I don't like stories that attempt to push any dogma. Nobody likes to be preached at. Let's leave that to the television evangelists.

So what *do* I like? In my view, good spiritual SF can encompass a number of sub-genres. As well as including some borderline traditionally religious work, it would also encompass stories of the occult, some aspects of horror, alternate realities, even time travel. It can be about spiritual forces, magic, and power. It can be inner-world stuff, made from our wishes, dreams and passions. It can be science clashing with the mystical. Where the explained and the unexplained meet. It can be as unlimited as any aspect of the genre. Above all, it's original and makes me *feel*, hints at a larger beyond than what I see.

I'm glad I changed my mind and made the effort to develop *Divine Realms*. My background and association with *On Spec* helped immensely. As for risk, there was a fair amount of it. I was worried that if *Divine Realms* wasn't accepted by a publisher, I'd not only suffer with a failure, but so would my fellow *On Spec* editors, simply by reason of their association with me. The last thing I wanted to do was to hurt them and hurt the magazine. So too would I have to consider the writers who contributed to the anthology: they allowed me to tie up their work for three years. Their faith



in me and in the book was considerable. I would have hated to tell them that the book wasn't going to be published, that no one was willing to take a chance on it. *Sorry guys —it's not going to work out, here are your stories, and good luck to you all. Better luck elsewhere.*

But that hasn't turned out to be the case. *Divine Realms* will soon be in print: the risk was worth it. And its success reflects upon everyone who believed in it and contributed to it. I'm a greater believer now in risk and faith than ever before. Crucial elements for any editor or writer.

But maybe also for anyone who shares this planet.

Risk and faith. In whatever ways

you exercise them, don't hold back. Take a chance, make a stand. No matter what the result, winning or losing, that's what living a vibrant life is all about.

## Congratulations!

Please see the list of nominees for the 1998 Prix Aurora Awards, page 59. We're especially pleased *On Spec* has been nominated again for Best Work in English (Other), and that David Chato's "The PlayTime Case" (*On Spec* Winter 1997) and Production Editor Jena Snyder's "Prescribed Burn" (*Tesseract*<sup>6</sup>) are among the nominees for Best Short-Form Work (English).

Best of luck to all the nominees! 🍁

*Divine Realms: Canadian Science Fiction and Fantasy.* Tales of the spiritual world edited by Susan MacGregor. September 1998. ISBN: 0-88801-227-6. \$17.95 Cdn./\$14.95 U.S., quality paperback, 5.5 x 8.5, 300 pp. To order, contact Turnstone Press, 607-100 Arthur Street, Artspace Building, Winnipeg, Manitoba R3B 1H3.

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## ABOUT OUR COVER ARTIST:

LYNNE TAYLOR FAHNESTALK has been a professional illustrator, graphic designer, and cartoonist for 18 years. Her work has appeared in numerous publications across North America. She also works in a bookstore where she was recently asked, "Do you have any of those dictionaries that go from A to Z?" Lynne lives in Coquitlam, B.C., with the lovely and talented Steve Fahnestalk, where she strives to place questions like the one above in perspective.

"Warrior Dance" was done in colored pencil with ink. Lynne works in airbrushed acrylic, colored pencil and ink on smooth bristol.





# The Sorcerer's Wife

Edo van Belkom

*illustrated by James Beveridge*

*Behna heard the front door burst open, then the sound of a heavy pair of boots stomping into the shop.*

"You!" said the gruff voice of a man. "What sort of trickery do you dispense?"

Behna moved over to the archway that separated the tiny shop from the rest of the house and pulled aside the curtain just enough to have a clear view into the shop.

The voice belonged to a swordsman. She recognized his long black hair, scruffy black beard and distinctively bent nose—no doubt broken several times over. His name was Helmar or Hillard or some such thing. She'd seen him around the more unsavory parts of town many times before, heard people speak poorly of him too. He was a notorious firebrand, a villainous brute of a man. And, if the truth be told, his kind was one of the reasons she chose to remain in the back room, working there in safety instead of out in the shop where things sometimes got dangerous.

"Whatever do you mean?" asked her husband Ruben, a younger man who ran the shop as an apothecary, but preferred to be addressed as "Sorcerer."

"The potion you gave me."

"Did it not work?"

"All too well," said the swordsman, anger evident in every move of his body.

"Instead of loving me, she is loving every man she sees."

"Perhaps you made a mistake administering the potion to her."

"No!" cried the swordsman. "I followed your instructions precisely. Two pinches of the powder in her food or drink, three times a day."

Ruben began to laugh.

And behind the curtain, Behna shook her head in dismay.

"No, that's not what I said," explained Ruben, still a bit of a smirk on his face.

"I told you to give her two pinches of the potion every three days."

"You did not!"

"I did," Ruben stated emphatically. "But perhaps your hearing was affected by the tankard or two of ale you drank before your last visit, because I clearly remember giving you the proper instructions."

The swordsman's hand moved to his side and his fingers curled around the hilt of his sword.

Behna took a deep breath and wrang her hands in frustration. Ruben had done well over the last few months selling their potions and remedies with the sort of conviction that helped make them work. But perhaps he had done the job a little too well, beginning to believe himself the great sorcerer he wished so much to be.

Ruben waved his hand through the air, as if dismissing the swordsman from the shop. "If you can't follow instructions properly, then perhaps she's better off loving other men..."

A fire suddenly came alight in the swordsman's eyes. He'd been angry up to that moment, but Ruben's last words had sent him over the threshold into rage. He gnashed his teeth together and unsheathed his sword.

Ruben turned his back on the swordsman as if he weren't even there, only enraging the man further.

Behna sighed in disappointment, having a very bad feeling about what might be coming next.

And then, as she'd feared, the shop was filled with the sound of a broadsword slicing through the air, and then through flesh, and finally, the crunch of bone.

The swordsman stood over the prone body of Ruben a moment, his

chest heaving in fury.

Why doesn't he run? thought Behna, as she watched the swordsman begin to slowly wipe his sword on his leggings. He must either be mad or incredibly dim.

The swordsman carefully sheathed his sword, but still made no motion toward the door.

Behna had had enough. She pulled aside the curtain and ran into the shop. "What have you done to my husband?" She stopped next to the body and let out a wail.

The swordsman looked at her dumbly.

"Sheriff!" she cried. "Someone call the Sheriff!"

That seemed to do it, for the swordsman finally turned for the door. A second later he was gone.

Behna immediately stopped her wailing, knowing full well that the Sheriff, or any other arm of the law, wouldn't be much inclined to visit this part of town. That's what made her operation so profitable, not to mention dangerous.

She looked at the dead body of Ruben at her feet. "You were both wrong," she said. "It's three pinches every second day." She shook her head one last time, then grabbed hold of the dead man's feet and dragged the body out of the shop.

The alley behind the inn was dark and dirty, not exactly the sort of place one would expect to find a sorcerer. Nevertheless, Behna had found several of them here, including her last one, Ruben, who had done quite well at the job up until that last little nasty bit at the end.

As she neared the back door of the



inn, she could better hear the joyful singing and carousing of those inside. From the sounds of it, everyone was having a grand old time. As she drew even closer, she also began to hear the snores of some of the inn's more inebriated patrons. There were three of them all told. Not as many as she would have liked, but enough to give her a decent choice.

She approached the first, a balding, middle-aged man with a few days growth of beard, and nudged at his prone body with her toe.

"Hey, what?"

"Up here," she said, pulling back the sides of her hood so that more of her face was visible to him.

"What is it?" he said, revealing to her that he had but three or four teeth in his head. "What do you want?"

"Have you had any schooling?"

He closed his eyes then and rubbed a dirty hand over his face as if still trying to bring himself awake. "Just what me father taught me with the end of his belt and the back of his hand."

Behna nodded and said, "Never mind," and moved on to the next drunkard lying in the alley. He seemed to be an older man, with a short shock of grey-black hair and a scar running from the bridge of his nose down one cheek to the middle of his neck. Perhaps he'd been a warrior in his younger years, or a victim of some sort of attack. Either way, the scar wasn't a good sign. Sorcerers didn't have scars on their bodies because they either stayed away from physical fighting, or could heal themselves in such a way as to prevent any permanent marks on their flesh.

Still, she decided to ask the man a

few questions. If he had enough of the other necessary qualities, then perhaps she could work around the scar.

"You there," she said, nudging him gently with her foot.

No response.

"I say, hello." She pushed him a bit harder and his body rolled onto its side. For a moment she thought he might be dead, but just as she was about to say something more, the man's cloak opened and she saw a dagger glint in his right hand.

"What do you want?" he said, holding the dagger's point against her leg.

"Nothing," she said. "I'm looking for my brother. I thought you might be him."

"Have no family. Them are all dead."

No doubt, thought Behna. "I'm sorry to hear that."

He grunted something in response, and she stepped away from the dagger. The threat gone, the second drunkard adjusted his position in the hopes of resuming his rudely interrupted sleep.

Behna quickly moved on to the third and final candidate.

He was an older man, or at least looked like one, with a crown of silver-white hair on his balding head. His beard wasn't simply an unkempt bit of scruff, but actually appeared to be neatly trimmed. His clothes were quite tattered, rags in fact, but she had learned long ago not to put too much stock in the manner of someone's dress, just as she had learned to judge spellbooks not by their covers, but rather by what was inside them.

"Hello there," she said, bending over the man to get a closer look at

him.

"Who's there?" he said, not yet looking up.

If she wasn't mistaken, he had a bit of an accent, perhaps from the islands—an added bonus if there ever was one. "Someone who would like to ask you a few questions."

"To what purpose?"

"I'm looking for a man to do some work for me."

"You mean a job?"

"Yes, you could say that."

"Oh, well then, I can't help you there," he said, straightening the rags hanging from his shoulders. "You see physicians and fortune tellers from one coast of this great land to the other have told me in no uncertain terms that work of any kind might prove fatal to my fragile existence. You see, quite tragically, I suffered a wound to my heart in the wars while trying to save several damsels in peril. Since then, I've been completely unable to work." He shrugged. "Ah, but such is the price for being a hero?"

Excellent, thought Behna. She almost believed what he said to be true. "What's your name?"

"Ah now, perhaps you've heard of me..." He ran a hand over his hair, flattening it down against his head. "Silas Skegg, at your service."

He pronounced the first name "Sigh-less" and Behna thought it appropriate considering that when he talked he seemed able to do so without taking a breath. "Name doesn't ring a bell," she said.

"No?"

"No, but no matter." She paused a moment, then said, "Have you had any schooling?"

"Schooling? Ha, I've been tutored

by some of the greatest minds of the ages. I've studied chemistry with Neron, I've listen to Soratious speak of matters philosophical and just, and I was the one who first told the great astronomer Shalamayo to 'Look up! W-a-ay up!'"

Behna had never heard of Neron and knew little of Soratious. She had heard of Shalamayo, but he'd been dead for a hundred years or so. Obviously this man was lying through his teeth, but he was lying so well that, even with what she knew, she almost believed he was telling the truth.

A rare find indeed.

"Uh, perhaps when I spoke to you before about a *job* I was using the wrong word," she said.

"Such a harsh word, isn't it? *Job*."

"Oh, absolutely," she said. "Perhaps I should have said I have a *position* that needs to be filled."

He scrunched his nose at that. "It still sounds a lot like work to me."

Behna nodded. "All right, what if I said I'm looking for a *partner*?"

"I'd say it's beginning to sound a little more interesting. What would I have to do exactly?"

"Mainly just talk."

"Ah, now *that* I can do very well."

"I know."

The curtain was drawn aside and Silas stepped lightly from the shop into the back room. "He says he wants a position that will bring him luck tonight at the gaming table."

Behna nodded. It was a common enough request, since there were more gaming establishments in the town than places to buy food. She'd made dozens of different luck potions and they'd all been successful. As a



result they were the most expensive bit of magic she dispensed. The only danger with such potions was selling too many on any given day. If too many gamblers under the influence of her magic were at the same table at one time, somebody would have to lose and that would compromise the magic in all of the potions, not to mention bring an angry customer or two back into the shop. Two luck potions on any given day was her limit, but not to worry, since this one was her first customer of the morning.

"Did he say what game he was going to play?"

Silas shook his head. "Was that important? I should have asked him, right?"

"Too late now, just remember for next time."

"All right."

Behna prepared the potion, grinding the ingredients with her mortar and pestle until it was a fine powder. Then she added the powder to a vial of pure spirits that would make the mix more agreeable as it went down.

"Is it ready?" asked Silas.

Behna held it up to the light shining in through one of the windows. The liquid was a brilliant green with bits of sediment swirling slowly around within it. It looked right, but its ultimate effectiveness would depend on the humor of the one ingesting it. The man out in the shop could win spending money for the week, or enough to last the rest of his life.

"Done," she said at last.

"All right, what do I tell him?"

Behna let out a contented sigh. Silas was an excellent student. He was eager to play his part and conscientious enough to want to do it right.

"Tell him he is to take the potion exactly one hour before he's to sit at the gaming table. Then, once he sits down, he must not eat or drink anything, lest he wants to dilute the potion's effectiveness. Nor can he get up—even to relieve himself or fill his empty stomach—because doing so will break the spell completely. So advise him that it might be an idea not to eat or drink anything before he heads out tonight."

Silas listened carefully as she spoke, nodding in understanding at each of the important bits of information. Then he repeated what she had told him, word-for-word, until he was sure he had the instructions exactly right.

"That's it," she said, pleased. "Now go."

Silas returned to the shop, drawing the curtain closed behind him.

When he was gone, Behna stepped up to the curtain and pulled it slowly aside to watch Silas in action.

"Sorry to take so long, my good man, but this is a potion more powerful than any I've created to date. Hence it took some time to make it right."

The customer smiled and nodded. "Can I have it now?"

Silas held up a hand. "Not just yet. This is a potent mix, made with nothing but the finest ingredients culled from decades of searching through magical forests, fields of dreams, and sparkling miracle waters known to but a chosen few..."

The customer's eyes widened. He was obviously beginning to feel that he was getting something *special*.

"Now listen closely, my friend; your future fortune and financial well-

being depend on each word I say. Do heed my words and the riches you seek will be yours; ignore me or..." A pause. "...forget, my good man, and misery will be your life's companion."

Behna smiled at that. Her potions were good, but Silas's presentation of them made them even better. So he was a scoundrel and a bit of a drunkard—he was also a showman and could explain her magic in a way she never could.

It hadn't mattered all that much in her younger years, but eventually the inherent dangers of her profession had begun to catch up to her.

She'd nearly been killed several times by angry customers who'd taken her potions incorrectly. The last time it had happened, she'd been mortally wounded and it had taken all her knowledge of the magical arts to save her life. After that episode she sought out a partner, a "husband," someone who received a decent salary from her in exchange for taking all of the risks.

"...Nor can you get up from the table to relieve yourself or fill your empty stomach," Silas continued. "But, I ask you, why would you even want to do such a thing when every minute at the table will reap you a reward..."

Silas understood the arrangement perfectly and was enjoying playing his part. The danger would come later, perhaps in a few months when he began to believe that he was actually the one who possessed the knowledge and power, and not Behna. Once that thought got into his head, his days would be numbered.

Only time would tell on that count.

For now, he was doing well and was perhaps even the best one yet. Profits were already up, and more and more customers were coming into the shop each and every day.

If things continued on like this, she might have to find another "husband" and open up a second shop on the other side of town.

The thought made her smile. ♣

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:** EDO VAN BELKOM, along with co-writer David Nickle, won the Bram Stoker Award for his last story in *On Spec*, "Rat Food," which appeared in the Spring 1997 issue. Author of three novels and over 130 short stories, Edo's first collection, *Death Drives a Semi*, is an October 1998 release from Quarry Press of Kingston, Ontario. Quarry also published Edo's first nonfiction book in 1998, *Northern Dreamers: Interviews with Famous Authors of Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Horror*, which features interviews with such top Canadian SF and fantasy writers as William Gibson, W.P. Kinsella, Guy Gavriel Kay, and Robert J. Sawyer.

**ABOUT THE ARTIST:** JAMES BEVERIDGE dwells in suburban Edmonton actively seeking the truth within the conundrum that is creativity, through activities both manual and silicon-based. Considered by some to be the poster boy for the Aesthetically Dyslexic, he is currently expanding his website with unsolicited visions from R. Jordan's *Wheel of Time* series. Visit his website for more insights into his mind: <[www.darkcore.com/~sage](http://www.darkcore.com/~sage)>.



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# ...And the Retrograde Mentor

Hugh A.D. Spencer

*Illustrated by James Beveridge*

## ***Today's Instructional Audio:***

*This is how to read a book. Get one of those small square things off the shelf and hold it in both hands. Now open your hands while keeping hold of the edges of the book. Those sheets of paper are fastened at one end so they won't fall out. The little lines of squiggles on the paper are called sentences and they are made up of something called words. You don't need to worry about that right now, just take the book over to a friend who knows how to read. Now you can begin...*

Perhaps I was wrong. I might have a few more things to say.

One morning, an odd, non-substance starts coiling its way out of my computer and forms a pool of almost-fluid on my desktop.

Uh-oh.

"What are you doing here?" I ask.

Something resembling a head and shoulders rises out of the pool. It hasn't a mouth yet, so it can't say anything.

The Apparatus has returned.

"I only work with numbers these days," I continue. Numbers are great for staying out of trouble—if any of the infinite strings of ones and zeroes I push each day takes the form of a message, it certainly isn't through any action on my part.

The Apparatus becomes a thin stream of monochrome and pours itself into a standing posture.

"I was downloaded to you by the Health and Recreation Matrix," the

Apparatus says. "It says it's time for you to come out of retirement."

Like I said, there may be more to say after all.

### ***Today's Instructional Audio:***

*This is how to drive your car. First, go outside your house. That big thing with the wheels is the car. Next, walk over to the car, take hold of one of the handles and pull. This motion should open the door...*

"Something's different about you," I say. "You're a little out of focus."

The Apparatus paces about my living room, looking for somewhere comfortable to sit. It used to have a favorite chair—its command center in the bad old days. That's where it would censor a lot of my work, fulfilling its directive as living software. From that chair, the Apparatus killed my writing career. From that chair it also used to watch a lot of sit-coms.

The Apparatus is out of luck. I threw that chair away years ago.

The Apparatus looks annoyed as it comes to rest on the end of my sofa.

"I know!" I cry with delight. "You're very old software now. Why haven't you been upgraded?"

The Apparatus sighs. "I had retired too. There's relatively little need to protect the community from dangerous creative expressions these days."

I put on my elderly and much-loved tweeds and open the door. "Because there's relatively little expression in the community?"

The Apparatus gets up and follows me outside. "That may be true," it says. "But you might want to be careful who you say that to."

The Apparatus is trying to sound

threatening. It is not succeeding.

"I still don't see why you want to go out," the Apparatus says as we walk across the porch.

"Research," I reply. "I like to get my facts straight."

The Apparatus' pseudo-mouth pulls down into a frown. It must suspect that I'm telling the truth; there isn't much written or visual information available online anymore. Just those cryptic binaries flashing past the screen.

"Don't be too long," it says.

*(Oooh! Tough program, I think.)*

Out on the front lawn, I see that my neighbor is practicing his astral levitation. He's about twelve feet in the air, sitting on a bamboo platform, with a pair of big headphones clamped on his head. His eyes are closed and there's a tube extending from one of his nostrils. The tube leads to a large transparent cylinder lying on the grass. I estimate that the cylinder contains enough nutrient to keep him going for several days.

Then I notice a stretch of dirty fur in the shadow of the platform. My neighbor's cat has starved to death. I call over to the Apparatus and point at the dead cat: "Can you call the robot service to come over and clean this up?"

It scowls at me: "How would I do that?"

I sigh inwardly; the Apparatus really has been out circulation. "They send auto-vans around to look after dead and injured animals, stray children, that kind of thing. Access the number for the Roads and Plumbing Matrix, they'll do something for you."

The Apparatus turns and stomps back into the house. Its feet make a



soft sucking sound as it moves across the porch.

As I sit in the autobus, I consider my psychically ascending neighbor. How does he go to the bathroom up there? Maybe solving that problem is part of his astral training. But I suspect we had better ask the robots to look into that as well.

When I get to the library, I check the mailbox and take out a set of keys and a flashlight. The keys are rusty. I open the door, turn on the flashlight and start my research.

### ***Today's Instructional Audio:***

*This is how to take the right drugs: check the colored dots tattooed on your left wrist. Now match the colors of the dots with the colors of your pills. Now count the number of dots on your wrist. That's the number of pills you should take. If you have trouble with the counting, ask a friend...*

For the first time in years, I get an e-mail that actually has words in it:

*"Love your new stuff. Come over for dinner."*

I haven't heard from Sybil in a very long time. It's been even longer since I've seen anything she's written.

But who *is* writing these days? I ponder this as the autobus approaches her warehouse.

"My body is my art," Sybil pronounces as she holds out her glistening blue-scaled hand.

It is quite a remarkable hand. Over dinner she shows me how she can drink wine through the tiny mouths set at the end of her fingertips—the tiny gray tongues lap at the amber fluid. Later on she shows me how she

is able to adjust the temperature and texture of her palms at will. She touches me in some truly remarkable ways.

When we finish eating (well, I eat; Sybil ingests nutrient molecules) Sybil shows me her gallery. Works in progress. All of them in the same medium: herself.

She has a very tasteful intelligent lighting system that showcases the contents of the fluid sacs in some very evocative ways: her insect self with its jeweled exoskeleton; her ultra-ectomorphic self with elegant spindle-limbs that could only stand upright on the moon; even a bioluminescent self that doesn't need any lighting. There are dozens more variations in aesthetic genetic engineering.

"But you were such a good writer," I say. Stupid statement, I suppose. But all I can manage, faced with this overwhelming bio-aesthetic display.

"Words can only mediate experience," Sybil says as she teases the pulsing abdomen of a headless clone. "Flesh is a much more direct medium. It's what today's audiences can relate to."

Then I knew that Sybil hadn't changed much. First writer I knew to break into television, first to write for multimedia. First to nail down that screenwriting contract in Hollywood. She always knows the market, knows popular tastes. Tastes that seem to be a little carnivorous right now.

But Sybil seems pleased that I'm writing again. She says she heard some of my recent work and she appreciates my direct language and "the simple balance of my compositions."

It's a good first date. Unusual, but good.

**Today's Instructional Audio:**

*This is what you should do when you want to have non-lethal/non-toxic sex. Lick the genitals of your partner(s). Lick them for a long time and use as much saliva as possible. You need to do this because your saliva has been chemically changed to form a thin layer of indestructible plastic over your partner(s)'s genitals. This layer will protect you from any sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) that your partner(s) might have.*

*Your partner(s) should also lick your genitals. This will make things even safer because now there will be a thin plastic layer that will keep you from passing on any STDs to your partner(s).*

*Of course if everybody is doing a lot of licking you might not need to continue much further...*

Quite a month. I've got a new job, I'm traveling outside my neighborhood for the first time in the new millennium, and I have a *girlfriend* (I still think of Sybil as female, although I have to be flexible with my definitions).

Life is much more interesting.

But the Apparatus is still living in the past. It keeps looking over my shoulder, reading my drafts, frowning a lot, but never finding anything objectionable. This must be very frustrating for it.

I don't care.

One morning, the Apparatus walks into my office holding a print-out in its jointless fingers.

"You can't submit this draft," the Apparatus says as it goes a little more out of focus. Maybe it is nervous.

"What's the problem?" I say

calmly.

The Apparatus points to a section of the manuscript: "The language is too abstract. The word *genitals*, in particular, is too technical."

"But I chose that word deliberately," I reply. "'Genitals' is to the point and describes the relevant body parts in an objective gender-neutral manner."

Lines of irritation flicker across the Apparatus' face. "But half your audience won't know what you're talking about. They're just as likely to start sucking their toes."

That's pretty witty, I think. I wonder if the Apparatus means to be funny.

I lean back in my chair and put on my thoughtful expression. "So you think I should use something more accessible? Words that people are more familiar with? How about 'cock' or 'pussy'?"

The Apparatus scowls at me. "Those terms are sexist and offensive."

Ah, nostalgia.

Then I think of Sybil and wonder how you define sexism when people are inventing new sexes.

I continue: "Why don't I try something more evocative? Use some adjectives?"

"Such as?" the Apparatus is rightly suspicious.

"How about 'thunder-muscle'? 'Hot, steamy love-tunnel'?"

The Apparatus glares at me. There's a rippling in its forehead and I realize that it is probably trying to use its third eye on me. Nothing emerges. It probably doesn't have enough power.

"This is a very serious matter," the



Apparatus says as it turns away from me. "Thousands of people could die if they can't understand your text."

"What about some really basic terms: 'pee-pee'? 'Woo-woo'?" I smile.

The Apparatus drops the print-out on my desk and leaves.

Over the next few days, whenever I see the Apparatus, I try out different ways to describe a penis and a vagina. "Love-log" is still my personal favorite.

Eventually the Apparatus gives up and I submit the original draft.

Sybil puts on a party, and there I learn that I've become something of a celebrity. At least that's the line that Sybil takes as she introduces me:

"This man is the *hottest* thing in literature," she says. "You must have heard his work on those new public service audios. His new essay on rectal cleansing is *devastating* in its clarity."

The man with compound eyes seems impressed. "Hey! You really helped out in the can the other day!"

"My pleasure," I reply.

Audios indeed. Nobody reads anymore.

Dating Sybil has made me feel like an artistic trilobite, so I have resolved to enjoy this party. Go loose, show the people and other entities what a groovy humanoid I am.

I admire all the bio-cosmetics I see and I ingest every drug that gets passed around. This may not be the most responsible behavior, but if I damage my mind in some way, it probably won't hurt my writing.

But so far nothing seems to be having any effect.

"What a pity," Sybil says when I advise her of my condition. "Perhaps the caterer's drugs are too specialized to work on a non-modified person." Sybil tries to look sympathetic but I know that the puritanical behavior of my blood-brain barrier is very gauche. Like showing up for the Nobel Prize in a tractor hat.

Sybil says something about wanting to compliment an old friend on her new pigmentation patterns ... and disappears.

Alone, I wander over to the catwalk, climb up and observe the orgy from a distance.

The laser patterning from Sybil's lighting system catches the moisture off the glistening forms in some unique configurations. With the bright lights, violet shadows, and quasi-human shapes, it looks like a Hieronymous Bosch theme park down there.

The flesh mass writhes and converges and I can see that Sybil has become part of a spinal-fuse with a five-foot quasi-amphibian and a woman with tentacles and rainbow skin.

Well, I decide, it had been a challenging relationship while it lasted.

The music ... *music*? The *sonic expressions* are interesting, so I decide to stay for a while. Just before dawn, the robot trucks roll in and start hooking nutrient pipes into the newborn organism.

### **Today's Instructional Audio:**

*This is what you should do if you and your friends decide to evolve into a higher life form: plan ahead as much as possible. If you have any family, call 911 and arrange to have*

*some robots look in on them after you are gone. Once you get to the party, dance your brains out, fuck anything that moves, and drink/smoke/inject anything they give you. You don't have to worry anymore. You won't be driving home.*

Months later, I'm living in a warehouse of my own. I've left everything behind except my computer and the Apparatus. I really enjoy annoying the poor semi-alive entity, and the daily nagging keeps me from missing deadlines.

The Apparatus stands at the doorway leading into my office.

"You brought more of them home, didn't you?" it says.

I turn away from my keyboard.

"They were wandering around the lake shore. Their parents are gone."

"People will think you're some kind of pervert."

"I'm not." I shrug. "And in case you hadn't noticed, community standards have changed."

The Apparatus turns away from me; in the afternoon sun it looks almost transparent. It is silent. Is it too frustrated, too angry to speak? Perhaps it just has nothing to say.

I pick up my manuscript and go downstairs.

The children will have finished their lessons by now. The older ones will be setting out the supper meal soon.

At bedtime I will read them some new stories. 🍁

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:** HUGH A.D. SPENCER lives and writes in Etobicoke, Ontario. For an earlier look at the Apparatus, please see his story "The Progressive Apparatus," in the Summer 1994 issue of *On Spec*.

**ABOUT THE ARTIST:** please see page 12.



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# Blind Date

David Chato

*illustrated by Ronn Sutton*

*"You're certain he's worth it?"*

*"He is, Joyce. You know the type. A buried treasure."*

*"He's buried pretty deep, Breena."*

*"Still..."*

*"Hello?"*

His dinner was getting cold. He quickly checked his watch. 7:37 p.m. It was Thursday. Where was she?

"Breena? Can you at least hear me? Switch to soundex only, if you can." The place across his table remained silent and empty. He sat drumming his fingers on the dark wood with his dinner untouched in front of him.

In the small confines of his single-bedroom apartment, the dining table took up an unfair amount of space. But then it was an important piece of furniture. In fact, aside from his bed, it was his only other piece. This where Charlie lived and, in a way, it represented his small, insular approach to life. He didn't care to look beyond its walls through any window other than the one ImageScan provided. Why should he? With ImageScan technology, he could share a meal and conversation with anyone he knew, practically anywhere in the world. This was his reality. All he needed was a stable connection.

For the past couple of months, Breena had been the only person on the other side of his electronic window. They spoke almost every day, and had ImageScan visits at least twice each week. Thursdays were special, though. They always had dinner together on Thursdays.

He was fairly sure they were in love.

They had never met.



She was a couple of thousand miles away, in Vancouver. But for Charlie, the distance was irrelevant. He sat alone, waiting for her to appear out of thin air, literally. She was now eight minutes late.

"I'm betting you're not there, okay? I'm guessing your system isn't working." By now, the ImageScan should have been projecting her in three dimensions in the semi-solid ghostly colors that the current bandwidths allowed. But there was nothing.

"Damn. Well, might as well make sure it's not my problem." He leaned back in his chair. There was still steam rising from the wild rice pilaf on his plate. He looked at it and pushed it away. "ImageScan, run a self-test, please, and—"

"Charlie?" Breena's light voice came from across the table. It hung there in midair. The space was still empty.

He looked up, startled. "You're late. What happened?"

Out of the darkness, an outline, then Breena's translucent form appeared. The high-backed chair in which she sat was more solid-looking than the moving picture of her being transmitted. It was a quirk of the technology. Remaining still allowed the system to completely form and project a reasonably solid, life-sized, three-dimensional picture. But when a person started moving about, the ImageScan had a bit of a lapse. Edges got ragged. Colors faded and became transparent. Still, it was a reasonably decent way to pay a visit. In Charlie's mind it had become the only way.

"Sorry. Have you eaten?" Breena's

face looked up at him. She appeared nervous. But even without her characteristic smile, she was beautiful. Black hair framing a pair of deep, green eyes. Her pale complexion provided great contrast for her darker features. Charlie liked that. It projected well on the ImageScan.

"No, haven't even started. I was worried you'd forgotten or had a problem." He slowly pulled his dinner plate back.

"Charlie." Breena shifted uncomfortably in her chair. "I do have a problem. We have a problem. This isn't going to work."

Charlie's mouth silently formed the word "what?" He looked down to the place where her corresponding dinner plate should have been. There was nothing. Instead, her elbows rested slightly out of calibration, floating a half-inch or so above his table's surface. She buried her face in her hands and rubbed her eyes.

"Breena? What is going on?" he asked, concerned.

It didn't seem right. Things had been working fine. They looked forward to their weekly dinners. The food would be agreed upon in advance and there was always wine to be shared. They had completed each other's jokes, raised the flags of mutual peeves; on occasion, they had even reached across to intermingle images of their hands touching. They were perfect together, he thought. And now this.

"Charlie, I have decided..." She stopped, unable to finish. Her eyes seemed to fill with tears, but it was difficult to tell. The resolution wasn't that good.

"Breena, what is it? Vancouver can't be that bad!" He tried to lighten the mood. "Here," he said, reaching across the table. He held out the palm of his right hand at the maximum boundary of the system. It was a tricky move. If one stuck something outside camera range, it would disappear from the projection at the receiving end. Breena definitely would not be comforted by the sight of Charlie extending a stubby arm with a hand missing.

"I've met someone," she said, remaining stiffly in her chair.

"You've met...?" His words trailed off.

"Yes," she said firmly. "No more ImageScan dinners. Understand?"

"But Bree, I don't get it," he said awkwardly. He tried to remember if there had been any sign from their previous dates that something was wrong. He came up empty. "How could we have spent all those hours together? There were visits we didn't want to end. You told me that last time we met. It's always seemed so right." He withdrew his hand to slump back into his chair. "I can't believe it."

Breena wiped her eyes with the back of a sleeve. She looked directly at him. "It would be best if we just forgot about all this image stuff and went on our way. I am not giving this fellow up."

Charlie groped for a thread. "It's Peller, isn't it?" he said angrily.

Claude Peller was a society snake in the ImageScan community. Charlie had discovered his reputation too late, after inviting him once for an eight-guest meal just before Christmas. It was an exceptional

dinner party, requiring Charlie to lease two more ImageScan projectors and upgrade his hardware to handle the additional channels. They all sat around their respective tables, each guest occupying his or her own place with their distant, ImageScanned visitors around them. Stan Hajek in Toronto, Wayne and Pamela somewhere in southern California, Rosie Barr all the way from Perth, Joyce in Manchester, and Claude Peller from his villa in Austria.

Charlie remembered it now: Peller was seated right in front of Breena, who had been invited at the last minute by Joyce. Damn, what a blunder! He should have seen the outcome of somebody like Peller spending a couple of hours sitting across the table from a vision like her. If he had only known.

"You be very careful with this guy Peller. He's a virtual waste of bandwidth. Ask Joyce. She's actually spent real time with him. He's a dump." Charlie couldn't help continuing the thought in his head. *A very rich dump, though—one of the better European ski resorts. Damn.*

"It's not him, Charlie," she said emphatically.

"Who then, Bree? What could be better than what we have?" He looked down and shook his head slowly. "I can't believe this is happening."

"It would be better if I just don't say, Charlie." She looked to one side, then back again. "I have to go. I'm wiping my ID from your list and I'm removing yours from mine. Don't waste time trying to make an ImageScan visit again."

She looked straight at him. With her gaze almost perfectly still, the colors and texture of her face became so solid and lifelike, Charlie imagined her actually there. He locked on to her eyes, hoping for a positive sign.

"Breena, don't leave," he pleaded.

"Goodbye, Charlie," she said.

Her image flickered and disappeared.

It had been almost two hours since she had independently decided to ruin his evening. He poured the last inch of wine from the bottle into his glass. "What a waste." He looked at the uneaten meal. The words took on a different meaning once he heard them aloud. "What a waste," he said again.

He got up, carried his plate to the small kitchen and dumped his food into the sink. It splattered everywhere. He didn't care. It would all be there the next morning. Everything might look different in the light of day. He could clean it up then. Right now, the only things that concerned him were his hurt feelings, and finding a reason why she would want to leave; why she would want to drop him like a plate of stale, cold dinner into a sink. The mess sat there dripping slowly down the drain, making him think about exactly that.

The next morning he didn't feel any better, only battered in a different way. Quickly consuming an entire bottle of wine was not a good idea. Following it up with a second didn't help. He had spent some disoriented time trying to vomit into a

moving toilet at 3 a.m. before finally passing out in the hallway outside his bedroom. The hard parquet floor was a poor substitute for a pillow, as the numbed side of his face was just now reminding him. It had been a difficult night.

The artificial voice of the soundex interrupted:

*"You have a call from..."* There was a slight pause as the system decoded the identity of the caller. *"...Joyce Owens ... Manchester ... England..."*

"Stop." Charlie demanded. He pushed himself up. A string of saliva joined his blistered lips to the hardwood floor. "Put Joyce through." His voice was low and raspy.

*"Repeat, please."*

He crawled into the bedroom and leaned back against the foot of his bed. "Put her on," he said as loudly as the hangover would allow.

"Hey, Chip." Joyce's loud accent was more than he could handle.

"Joyce. Quietly, slowly ... please." The soundex adjusted for his location and created a point source for Joyce's voice-only transmission.

"You sound terribly rough, Chip. Dancing on the pub tables, were we?" She sounded as if she were sitting on the floor four feet directly in front of him.

"We don't have pubs here, Joyce. And no, I wasn't dancing on anything." Charlie choked slightly on the words. "Need some water." He got up and went to his washroom. The soundex followed.

"What time is it, Joyce?" he asked.



"About six p.m. Noon where you are." The rattling of kitchen sounds traveled with her voice. "Discovering the demons of hops, then?" she asked.

"Grapes, actually. A pretty good Shiraz. Just loses a bit of magic after the tenth glass." He popped open a pill bottle and took twice the recommended dosage.

"A celebration then? What was the occasion?" The sound of something frying came from Joyce's kitchen, several thousand miles away.

"No. Definitely not a celebration."

"Breena?"

"Hmmm," Charlie said affirmatively. He stared at his puffy, pale face in a small mirror.

"Poor Chip. Not a celebration with Breena, eh? That *is* a shocker. I thought you two were having some lengthy meals lately. Quite tasty, last I heard."

He saw an opportunity. "Joyce, you know Bree; she's your friend. You've spent real time with her, right?"

"Lovely real time. When she's flying through on business. Our neighborhoods share the same damp climate. Invigorating. Our walks in the rain are glorious."

"Walks in the rain? You've been spending too much time out, Joyce."

"And you, Chip, have not been spending enough. When was the last time *you* were outside?"

Charlie stepped around her comment. He knew Joyce was right, but he had lost touch with the reason why. He lived comfortably, deep within his agoraphobia. It had been

so long, he couldn't remember which had come first, his fear of the real world, or the ImageScan's alternative to it.

"I don't need the analysis, Joyce, not now." He ignored her question. "What I need is help with Breena."

"I'll try," Joyce said.

"Did she ever mention someone else, a guy I mean, besides me?"

"I am not a tattler, Chip. If Bree didn't want to tell, I'm not about to speak for her." She paused. "He's real enough, though."

Joyce did know something. "It's Peller, isn't it?" he said firmly.

"That pig? You must be joking," she laughed. "Claude Peller is so transparent, he can't even form a decent ImageScan. You know he enhances his picture? In real, he looks much less impressive than what you see on the ImageScan. I could forgive him that, if there was something more substantial behind the fakery. But there isn't. Inside the ski sweater is nothing but a vacuous little snow tan of a man."

"Then who?" Charlie left the washroom and sat down on the end of his bed.

"Not telling."

"I need to know."

"You'll need to find out yourself, Chip."

"I need to see her."

"Yes..."

Charlie's thoughts came up against a wall. "But she's pulled her ID. I can't make an ImageScan connection. She even wiped her soundex address."

"There *are* other ways," Joyce suggested.

The idea of leaving his apartment sent a shudder across Charlie's

back. The prospect of facing Breena in reality verged on impossible. "In real? I can't do that," he said flatly.

"If you want answers, you have no choice," Joyce replied.

Charlie squinted at the sunshine pouring through his bedroom window. It had been weeks since he'd forced himself to leave his place. Even then, it had been for some unavoidable dental work. Getting the truth from Breena might be even more painful, but he needed to know. "I'll go."

"Yes. That's the spirit, Chip. Meet Breena, get her back, then go find the other fellow and punch him in the nose."

"Just a slight problem..." he said.

"What's that?"

"I don't know where she lives, exactly."

"That, I will help you with, Chip," Joyce said, continuing her cooking. "First, you'll need to fly to Vancouver..."

It was typical fall weather for the west coast. Grey-green drizzle that smelled of the ocean crept through the seams of the cheap shell of a raincoat Charlie had purchased at the airport. The taxi left him on a dim, wet street in front of a row of attractive Victorian townhouses. Evening was approaching and they were all dark except for one. It glowed yellow through its windows with signs that she was home. Breena's house.

He fought off the anxiety he felt standing alone in the open. The sky grew darker and closed in on him.

This was it. He nervously double-checked the address on a scrap of

paper. If Joyce was right, this was it. He looked up at the number on the house. This was the place, it was time, this was ... it.

Charlie stood paralyzed, looking up at the front door. The shadow of a figure moved quickly past a window on the upper floor. He walked briskly down the street and away from the house, feeling like a coward.

"What am I doing here?" He looked down, and a drop of water fell from the end of his nose. "This is stupid. She's seeing someone else, damn it. I want to be home ... now."

He stopped and looked back at the house. Through the tall, uncurtained windows, he could see the inside of the main floor.

Candles. There were candles at a dinner table. He saw them flicker inside. She was expecting company.

"This isn't right," he whispered to himself. But he couldn't help his curiosity. He lurched across her short front garden and stood with his back against the outside wall, beside the dining room window. The drizzle thickened into rain.

*If the ImageScan is on, the guest won't see me but I'll see him, he thought. At least I'll find out who he is, what she sees in him.*

He slowly peered around the edge of the window frame. The room was beautiful, a testament to its owner. To one side, a fire softly glowed from beneath a carved mantel. Across the dinner table, white linen, silver, and fine china were elegantly arranged. Charlie sniffled in miserable contrast. His shoes filled with mud.

He adjusted his angle of view and

gasped. There, on the table, were two place settings. Two wineglasses stood with a bottle of Burgundy breathing nearby. She was seeing someone for real. He might be there with her now, preparing for an evening that could have been Charlie's. What stupid, unanticipated, bad luck. He withdrew from the window and closed his eyes.

"Idiot. I am such an..." He stopped. There was a new smell mixed with the rain. A sweet fragrance like a delicate garden.

"Charlie?"

It was Breena. Her voice and scent, and all real. If he opened his eyes, she would be standing right in front of him. And he would be standing there with his back against the cold brick wall, trapped, like a prisoner preparing for a firing squad.

"Charlie?" she said again. "Is that you?"

He opened his eyes.

She stood twenty feet away, on the more sensible paved path between the back of her house and the front walk. Her face was partially hidden in the shadow of a hooded poncho.

"What are you doing here, standing in the rain, planted in my garden?" she said and began to move closer, right toward him, less than ten feet away.

What was he doing there, standing in the rain, in her garden? He thought about answering, but how would he start? He said nothing.

She moved closer again, less than five feet away now. He could feel her breath on his cold, soaked face. He wanted to be home and dry and safe, but he didn't dare move.

She pulled back her hood, revealing her face in the dim lights of the street.

It wasn't her.

"Who are you?" he sputtered through wet lips.

He had heard Breena's voice. He'd recognized the way she had tilted her head when she approached. But this face wasn't hers. At least, it wasn't the one he had come to know on the ImageScan.

"Close your eyes," she said.

He complied, feeling little comfort behind his blindness.

"Listen to my voice," she said. "Remember the time we spent together. It is me, Charlie, the real me." She moved closer. "The enhanced ImageScan visage was the only way to compete with the world. Joyce knew that and convinced me to try. She knows you well, Charlie. She knows us both very well."

She held him firmly by his shoulders. "Now slowly, look at me. Look at my eyes. They were the only things I left unchanged."

He opened his eyes and stared deeply into hers. Their deep green color, their shape and clarity. All with the absolute resolution that reality provided. It was her.

"But the other man, Breena. Why did you leave me? Who—?"

She brought herself right up to him. There was no distance between them now. Her lips pressed against his and he felt her warm kiss. All the stumbling questions that filled his mind melted away into insignificance. He became empty of everything but the sensations of her, right there and with him, and *real*.



"You, Charlie. You are the other man. You always have been. I needed to know if you would cross the distance. I needed to know if you would give it up. I have."

His fear of being out and exposed, his feeling of loss, of creeping isolation and loneliness, all washed away. He took her hands and held them in his. The Image-Scan was a very poor substitute. He realized that now.

"Being here, with you... I'd forgotten there was so much more."

"It's glorious, isn't it?" she said, and looked up to let the rain fall on her face.

He did the same, feeling every drop. The rain came down more heavily.

"I love this weather," he said. "You need to get out more," she laughed.

It poured, unrelenting, soaking them both.

"Come inside," she said, helping him from the garden. "Our dinner is waiting." 🍁

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:** After a fifteen-year career in high technology, DAVID CHATO decided to plant himself in front of his computer and grow. He believes that we are all being squeezed between the converging lines of science fiction and science fact. He continues to seek a way out. His story, "The PlayTime Case" (*On Spec* Winter 1997) has been nominated for an Aurora Award for Best Short Fiction (English).

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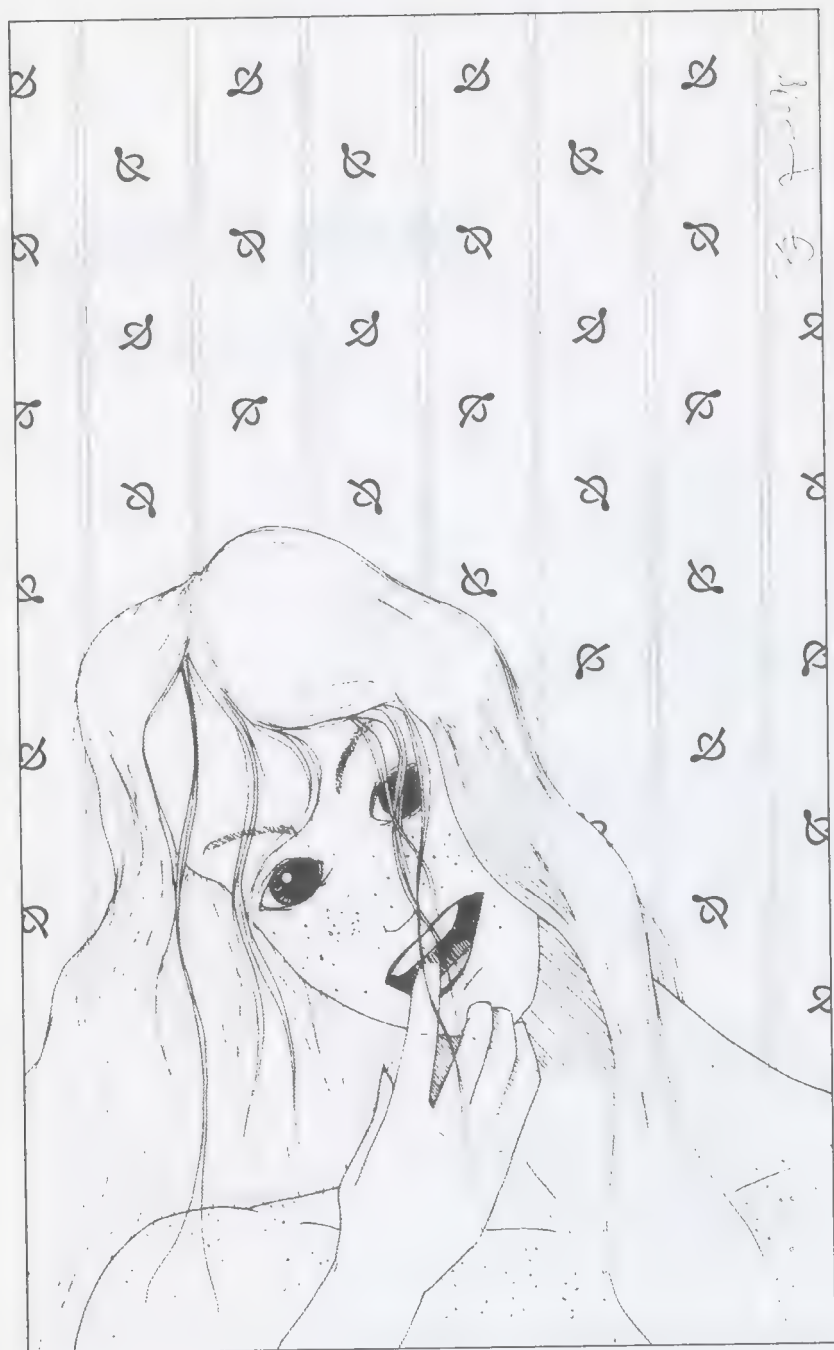
# Myths of Winter

Eileen Kernaghan

i. in this myth  
the world begins  
as a slow shivering  
and fracturing  
in ice mountains  
fissured like flawed crystal  
as a splintering and shattering  
in rivers of white glass

the first woman shapes from the singing air  
the arched ribcages of birds  
the luminous bones of animals  
the first man drums the sun  
like a flower of white fire  
into the sky of the first day  
drums himself into being

ii. in this other myth  
a black wolf eats the sun  
the sky cracks open  
stars plunge hissing and smoking  
into the white abyss of winter  
mountains     frost-bearded  
like slow-footed giants  
lumber seaward





# All That Matters

Robyn Herrington

*illustrated by Warren Layberry*

*Kevin closed the heavy front door with a thud. "Who is she today?" He put down his briefcase, took off his trench coat, and squeezed it into the already overfilled hall closet. He slipped out of his shoes and put them on top of the nearest pile, then looked at his wife.*

"Well?"

The pile of shoes toppled, a cascade of platforms and flats, spike heels and hiking boots, all styles to accommodate his daughter's changing wants; styles she would adore one hour, then refuse to wear the next. He didn't look around when Vicki finally said, "She's Mina."

"Fine," Kevin sighed. "Let me know when she's out of Mina. I can never talk to that one."

Vicki didn't answer.

He paused on the way to his den. "What?"

Vicki put her knitting to one side, tucked a loose strand of blonde hair behind one ear, and stared at her husband. "She's been Mina all day."

"All day?"

Vicki nodded. "Since about nine this morning. She was Carly when she woke, but Mina surfaced during breakfast. She's been Mina ever since."

"Typical," Kevin said. "Out of all of 'em, she'd settle on her."

"Do you think she's settled at last?" Vicki asked, soft voice barely hopeful.

Kevin waved the air as if batting her question aside. "Mina. I can't believe it."

"It was her hardest transition yet," Vicki said. "She couldn't talk, wouldn't wear clothes. I had a hard time getting her to her room." Vicki's pale brown eyes were moist and dark circles shadowed them. Her face was drawn. Tired. "She screamed for hours, then slept for a little while."

"Did you call Rollins?"

Vicki nodded. "As soon as I had her settled and knew she was all right. He said to watch her and call him if we had to, but I think she's past the worst of it."

"But why Mina?" Kevin shook his head. "That girl never did anything we wanted her to."

"Anything you wanted her to," Vicki answered quietly. She picked up the sweater she was knitting and began another intricate, colorful row.

It was time, Kevin thought, to face his daughter. "Where is she now?"

"In her room."

Kevin nodded. "Where else?"

Kevin opened the door slowly and hesitated.

He'd barged in to her room once, and she'd hit him with the ceramic angel he'd given to her on her eleventh birthday. He'd bought it in the hospital gift shop the day they'd had her admitted for the implants.

"Mina?" Kevin called into the darkness. "Mina, it's your father."

Her voice was low, guttural, older than her thirteen years. "Go to hell, Dad."

He sighed and ran his hand through his short, neat hair. "Mina, it's been a rough day for me. What have you been doing?" He heard a rustling at the far end of the room, hoped she was just reaching to turn on the lamp beside her bed. He pulled the door a little more in front of him, just in case.

The light flicked on as the lamp fell to the floor. Mina crouched beside her night table, long, knotted blonde hair covering most of her naked torso. Bright eyes stared at him. She chewed on one finger and giggled.

Kevin took a deep breath, kept his eyes on her face and forced a smile.

"How was your day, Mina?"

Mina waggled her head from side to side. "Don't know," she said.

"Are you hungry?"

"Always."

"Well, if you put on some clothes, you can come to dinner."

"Mom gave me food."

Kevin noticed the two bowls shoved almost under the bed. He closed the door, and went back to the living room. As he walked away, Mina giggled again.

"You fed her in her room." Kevin stood over his wife.

Vicki nodded, her face down, tired eyes locked on the sweater she was knitting.

"I thought we decided she had to come to the table for her meals, like any normal human being."

"You decided," Vicki said.

"And you agreed with me." Kevin sat in his recliner, pulled his tie off and flung it to the floor. He kicked his legs up and began to rifle through the magazine rack. He found an old issue of *Science Weekly*, and began to flip through the well-read pages, seeing nothing of the text and images. "Well you do, don't you?"

"In principle." Vicki's words were carefully measured, her tone even. She looked at Kevin. "But Mina isn't like any normal human being, not now. And it's our fault."

He closed the magazine with a snap. "We only wanted what was best for our daughter. Isn't that what every parent wants?"

Vicki turned her attentions back to the sweater and started another row.

"Yes. It is."

"We wanted what was best for her," he said again, tossing the magazine aside.

The night was almost uneventful. Mina woke them with her cries sometime around four a.m., and Vicki comforted her. Kevin fell asleep before she returned, but not before he'd made up his mind about Mina.

"Dr. Rollins is taking another call. If you stay online, you will be given the next available uplink. If you require immediate assistance, please redirect your call to another doctor by choosing the Emergency Line icon." A red cross flashed in the upper left corner of the screen.

"Cheap bastard," muttered Kevin, glaring at the video receptionist. "With all the money he makes, you'd think he'd spring for a real answering service, not some cheap repeating program."

"What was that?"

Kevin looked around. Vicki stood in the doorway, her white shirt stained with orange juice. He looked back to the screen. "And how is she this morning?"

"Better. Mina got herself dressed, Kevin. She's coming along nicely."

"Yes. I can tell that just by looking at you."

Vicki paused, redirected the conversation. "Who are you calling?"

"Who do you think?"

"Oh no," Vicki warned, "don't you dare..."

Kevin turned on her. "That isn't what we paid for," he said, pointing toward Mina's room. "That wasn't supposed to happen, and I'll be

damned if I'm going to accept that kind of result. Either we get our money back, or he fixes her. You want to see her get better as much as I do, don't you?"

"She is getting better..."

"Finally," Kevin said. He turned back to the screen as his terminal beeped. "Close the door on your way out."

Vicki pulled the door almost closed. She stood outside, listening.

"Dr. Rollins here," the voice said. Kevin heard a drawer shut, then saw the doctor as he returned to his desk. "How may I ... oh. Mr. Lewis. You're calling again." Dr. Rollins gave a tight-lipped smile and folded his arms. "How's Carly?"

"Mina," said Kevin. "Not Carly, Dr. Rollins. Mina. She's stabilized on Mina, for chrissakes, and I want to know what you're going to do about it."

Dr. Rollins stared impassively at Kevin. When he spoke, his voice had lost the genial tone he used when he greeted his callers. "Mr. Lewis, we've been through this. When you wanted to start your daughter on the treatments at such a young age, I warned you of the dangers. I explained that hormonal implants would work best after puberty, that there was a good chance there would be side-effects..."

Kevin leaned toward the screen. "But you also said that if we started before puberty, there was a greater chance of an even higher IQ, isn't that right? You said better athletic performance, greater intelligence, enhanced memory—isn't that what you said? You said the payoff would be worth it."



Dr. Rollins barely nodded. He took his glasses off and rubbed the bridge of his nose. "In a very small percentage of cases, there is a big payoff for taking such a gamble. But like any game of chance, Mr. Lewis, the odds of losing are much, much higher than the chance of the big win. Also, I said 'Some parents consider the payoff worth it.' I never have, and I told you so. Starting the therapy before puberty is too dangerous for the child. That, Mr. Lewis, is what I said. I only carried out the procedure because Carly is a strong girl, and it was my opinion that she'd come through this fine."

"Your opinion," Kevin said, "was way off."

"My opinion," said Dr. Rollins, "was based on numerous projections, projections which all indicated that your daughter had a very good chance of a full and speedy recovery."

"Well, you have to do something," Kevin said, sitting back. "I won't be stuck with Mina for a daughter."

Dr. Rollins spread his hands wide on the desk. "And what is it you want me to do?"

Kevin ran a hand through his hair. "Make her better. Make her Carly again."

"Mr. Lewis, it's not that easy. I can't turn her back into the girl she was..."

"I don't want the girl she was!" Kevin stood and paced back and forth. "Not someone average. Not someone mousy, just one of the crowd, a B-grade student. Dammit, I want what I paid for!" He slammed his hands on either side of the keyboard. "I want a daughter who's brighter and better and faster than all the other kids. I want her to be the

best, and that means..."

Dr. Rollins cut him off. "Mr. Lewis, I understand your frustration, but you have to understand mine. Hormonal implant therapy is still relatively new, and under the best conditions the results are less than perfect. Carly started her therapy under less than perfect conditions. Her illness and personality fractures reflect that."

Kevin glared at the screen. "I won't be stuck with Mina. I want a kid who's better than the rest, not some feral throwback who can't even read."

Dr. Rollins sighed. "Mr. Lewis, I have explained that we can remove the implants, but that's less advised than the original therapy. I want to discuss this with you and your wife before we consider going any further. We can make an appointment for next week." He checked a small pocketbook at his side. "What about Wednesday?"

"No need to ask Vicki," Kevin said. "She'll go along with whatever I decide. We both just want the best for our little girl."

Kevin never noticed when Vicki silently closed the door.

Mina joined them for lunch. Her long hair was pulled back and away from her face in a lopsided ponytail. She wore a baggy grey sweatsuit and ate her food with her hands.

"Slowly, Mina," said Vicki. "There's plenty of food. You don't have to gobble."

"I'm hungry," Mina said, face low over her plate, a spiral pasta sticking out of the her corner of her mouth. Her left hand firmly gripped a chicken leg; her right was filled with more

pasta.

"Put your food down," Kevin said. He didn't look at his daughter, wouldn't look at her while she behaved like an animal.

"She's doing much better," Vicki said, giving Mina a quick smile.

"But not good enough." Kevin glared at his wife, then shook his fork at Mina. "You're happy with this?"

Vicki blinked and laid one hand on Mina's arm. Mina looked at Kevin, her brown eyes wide. A piece of pasta was stuck to her cheek.

"Of course I'm happy with her," Vicki said. "I was happy with her before the implants. I loved each person she became. They weren't Carly, but they were all our girl." She smiled at Mina and took her hand. "When she was so sick for so long, I didn't think she'd ever get better." Vicki gave Mina's hand a squeeze and looked into her daughter's eyes. "All that matters is that we have our girl."

Kevin didn't answer immediately. "Pass the margarine."

He didn't have time to duck. A glob of greasy yellow hit the side of his head and slid into his ear. Mina giggled and covered her mouth with one hand.

"Goddamn it." Kevin wiped the margarine away with his clean white napkin. He wadded the material into his fist. "This," he yelled, "is not the daughter we wanted!" He stormed away from the table.

Vicki took Mina's chin in her hands and dabbed at her daughter's dirty face. She smiled and said, "She's just fine with me."

Mina took the napkin from Vicki's hands. "I hate him."

"No, you don't," Vicki answered.

"He's your father." She pointed to Mina's chin. "You missed a spot."

Mina wiped the pasta sauce from her face and twisted the napkin tightly between her hands. "I hate him."

Kevin was determined to let the terminal call until it was acknowledged. It took some time, but Dr. Rollins answered. When he saw Kevin, he frowned.

"I only take emergency calls on Sundays, Mr. Lewis. You've been told that before." He reached to disconnect the line.

"We'll sue," Kevin said.

Dr. Rollins stopped, hand poised in mid-air. "Sue?" he repeated. "Sue for what?"

"Undue stress placed on the family unit," Kevin said. "Creating an atmosphere unhealthy for proper relationships. Failure to provide services paid for." He shrugged. "I don't know. Something. That's what we'll pay the lawyer to figure out. If nothing else, you'll get negative publicity. How do you think your other patients will like that, Dr. Rollins? Seeing their good doctor on the news, seeing his name and his work dragged through the media muck."

Dr. Rollins stared at the screen. When he spoke, his voice was calm, his face coolly impassive. "Mr. Lewis, I have told you what your options are." He held up a finger. "Number one: leave Mina as she is. Her learning curve should be remarkable now that she's past puberty. Let her settle into the person she can become." A second finger went into the air. "Number two: have the implants removed. I do not recommend that. I've seen too many removals go horribly

wrong, and have decided that I will not be responsible. You'll have to find yourself someone who cares less about their reputation and their patients, and more about the fee you'd pay them."

"My money was good enough for you before."

"I have ... reconsidered." The doctor's words were measured.

"Fine." Kevin folded his arms and shrugged. "Fine. Don't do it. You're right—I can find someone else, and while you're picking up what's left of your career, we'll..."

Dr. Rollins leaned close to his terminal screen and his voice dropped to a hostile whisper. "Mr. Lewis, you are entitled to sue me. But I'll sue you right back, you arrogant son of a bitch. I'll sue you for harassment, and I'll sue you for endangering your child." Dr. Rollins took a deep breath. "My reputation and job will survive, Mr. Lewis. What about yours?"

Kevin clenched his teeth. "You bastard..."

"We have an appointment next week. Until then, I don't want to hear from you. Good day, Mr. Lewis."

The connection closed, and Dr. Rollins' image faded.

"Bastard," said Kevin again.

That night, Mina ate in her room with her mother while Kevin ate alone in the dining room. He was still furious with the oh-so-righteous doctor. Couldn't get them in right away, couldn't make room for them. Kevin shook his head and stabbed at his potatoes.

Even one more day of Mina was too many.

Kevin considered moving to a ho-

tel until this whole mess had been cleaned up. And he'd let Vicki deal with Rollins. She wanted what was best for their kid. She'd make Rollins see that Mina wasn't right.

"Dinner went well," said Vicki. She sat in the chair beside her husband. "She's having a bath now."

"And you left her alone in there? You don't know what kind of mess she'll make."

"She's fascinated by the water running from the faucet. I left it trickling. She'll be all right for a minute or two." Vicki drew in a quick, deep breath.

"What?"

Vicki looked at the stains on the table cloth and picked at a dried piece of pasta with one finger. "I was wondering what you spoke to Dr. Rollins about."

Kevin shrugged absently. "You know—getting our kid fixed."

"That's dangerous, Kevin. She could die." Vicki covered the stains with a napkin and folded her hands on top of it. "I heard about one family that tried to reverse the implant therapy, and their son ended up severely brain damaged. They had to put him in a private care facility." She sighed quietly. "He couldn't even use the bathroom by himself."

Kevin smiled placidly and patted his wife's hand. "I think you've been watching too many talk shows. It's never as bad as they make it out to be. There's always the 'our kid turned into a turnip' story. That won't happen with our kid."

Vicki didn't look up. "But how do you know?"

"I know."

Mondays were never good for Kevin.



The work always piled up over the weekend and he inevitably ended up at the office much longer than he wanted to. His mood was always bad when he got home. But this Monday was worse. He knew he was going home to Mina.

"Any change?" he asked. He didn't even bother to close the door or take off his shoes. He stood there as though he would leave if the answer wasn't what he wanted.

Vicki put down her knitting. Kevin vaguely registered that it looked like she was working on a different sweater. And he noticed she looked a bit better ... her hair, or make-up ... something.

"It was a good day," Vicki smiled. "Mina had a bath, got dressed and did her hair by herself. She helped me with lunch..."

"What did she do, drop the mushrooms in the salad?"

Vicki paused. "No. She helped me make some soup. She read the ingredients from the can, Kevin. It took her awhile, but she read them all, even the hard words. She's learning much faster, and..."

"And what?"

"I think," Vicki said, "she'll be able to start lessons in a week or two."

"Lessons?" Kevin barked. "School?"

"Not school," Vicki said, "not quite yet. But lessons here, at home, and maybe, in a while—yes, school. You should have seen her at lunch. She..."

Kevin threw his briefcase on the floor. "She's not going to go from reading 'Open can and add water' to classes in a week or two! She can't even use her knife and fork!"

Vicki turned away. The clicking of her needles resumed. "She can now."

"Well. I can see how you'd be excited." He snapped his fingers. "Of course! It makes sense to me now. Knife and fork this week, complex mathematics next."

The needles stopped. "I never said complex math, Kevin. But maybe some classes. We'll have to see."

"No," he answered, "we won't have to see anything. I've made an appointment for her to see Rollins. We're not going to spend the rest of our lives with Mina."

As he went by Vicki he heard a definite "No."

Kevin stopped. "Excuse me?"

"I said no," Vicki said. "No. I won't have Dr. Rollins do anything else to her. I won't have you do anything to her. There's nothing that needs to be done."

Kevin stood in front of his wife. He sighed heavily and put his hands on her shoulders. "You can't mean that. You don't mean that. You've been with her all day, and you're just tired. Where is she?"

"She's in her room. I think she's playing her computer games. Leave her be. She's just fine. And I'm just fine."

Kevin moved, grim determination setting his face.

"Kevin!" Vicki stood and grabbed him by the sleeve. "Damn it, Kevin, leave her be!"

He shrugged out of her grip and shoved her down. "You," he said, "stay here. I'm going to get what's left of our daughter."

Kevin came back with Mina in tow. Her loose hair had been washed and brushed, and shone like gold against her blue sweater. A game bleeped in her two-handed grip.

"Let go of my elbow." Mina pulled at his hold. "I can't play."

Kevin shoved his daughter onto the couch, next to Vicki. Without looking up, Mina curled her legs under her and continued to thumb the buttons on her game.

"That's not what we paid for," Kevin shouted, pointing. "That's not what we want."

"What you want!" Vicki shouted back. She drew two deep, steadying breaths, then put her knitting beside Mina. "Careful of the needles, honey," and Mina nodded. Vicki stood and smoothed the front of her shirt. Then she lifted her head and faced Kevin. "All that mattered to me was that I had a daughter who was healthy and happy."

Kevin laughed. "Happy?" He looked from his wife to his daughter. "Hey, are you happy?"

The bleeping of the game was his only answer.

"There," he said to Vicki, "is that happy enough for you?"

"All that mattered to you was that she was better than everyone else."

"Every parent wants their kid to be the best," Kevin said.

"I didn't care about that," Vicki replied. "It was enough for me that she was bright, and healthy, and happy."

"That's not enough." Kevin's words were cold. He gazed down at his daughter, hunched over her game. "Vicki, how can that be enough for you?" He tapped his daughter on the head. "Mina? Mina, I'm talking to you!" With one swipe, he knocked the game from her hands. "Won't you pay attention to something other than that idiotic game? And you," he

turned back to Vicki, holding her gaze as he grabbed her knitting from the couch. "You're always face down over these sweaters!" He shook the unfinished project in his wife's face before tossing it across the room.

Vicki folded her arms and turned away, eyes tearing with frustration. He heard her exhale slowly. Kevin grabbed her by the shoulders. "Don't turn away from me when I'm talking to you!"

Mina sprang from the couch and tackled Kevin in the midsection. He landed with a thud and a grunt as the air rushed from his lungs.

"Don't you make Mom cry," Mina said, grabbing fistfuls of her father's hair, "ever!" She released him quickly and climbed back onto the couch.

Kevin got up slowly, eyes watering. One hand held his gut, the other rubbed at the side of his head. He watched his daughter watch him. Without looking at Vicki he said, "I'm going to a hotel."

"When did he leave, Mrs. Lewis?" Dr. Rollins had a pen in his hand. He'd been making notes since Vicki called him with the news that Kevin had left.

"About an hour ago. I would have called sooner, but Mina was upset. I had to calm her down."

"Frankly, Mrs. Lewis, I'm surprised you called me at all. Wouldn't Family Services have been a better choice?"

"Perhaps," Vicki agreed, "but I don't think they can help me."

Dr. Rollins put down his pen. "And you think I can?"

"Yes. I do." Vicki clasped her hands on the table before her, her voice calm. "Kevin hasn't been acting

like his usual self for the past few months, Dr. Rollins. At first I thought it was the stress of having our daughter ill, but..." She took a quick, deep breath. "When Carly started to develop her different personalities, he became angrier, more hostile. Now with Mina in the house, he..." she blinked quickly and smiled sadly. "Well, he's not happy with her at all."

"I'm aware of that," Dr. Rollins said, nodding slowly. "Are you aware that your husband has requested that the implants be removed?"

Vicki didn't move. "He told me."

"I explained to him that the procedure is risky, that I am against it. He said it's what you both want."

"No," Vicki said. "It's what he wants. I'm happy with Mina, Dr. Rollins. She isn't my Carly—will never be my Carly—but she's still my daughter. Since her personality settled, she's been learning quickly. She's taking care of herself now, and I think she'll be ready for structured lessons in a week or two."

Dr. Rollins frowned and made some more notes. "Did your husband know this?"

"I told him. I've been telling him all along that Mina's learning quickly. He just—well, he won't listen. He doesn't like Mina, Dr. Rollins." Vicki smiled sadly. "It's not what he paid for."

"And what about you, Mrs. Lewis?"

"All that matters to me is that my daughter is happy, healthy, and that my family is together."

Dr. Rollins sighed. "That's going to be difficult with your husband behaving the way he has been."

"That's where I think you can help," Vicki said.

"Mrs. Lewis, some doctors might intervene when life becomes difficult, might even offer short-cut solutions—but those solutions never work for long-term problems." His voice was even, sympathetic. "I'm not one of those doctors who offer a quick fix and false hope. Your husband's dislike of Mina is something best worked out with Family Services. I can promise, though, that I will not remove the implants. If Mina is learning at the rate you claim, then it would be a terrible mistake. Your husband will have to learn to live with her."

Vicki unconsciously laced and unlaced her fingers. "But this evening, before he left..." She looked down at her hands.

"What?"

"Kevin became violent, Dr. Rollins."

Dr. Rollins listened with new interest. "Violent? Did he hit you?"

"Almost," Vicki said. "And I believe he would have, if Mina hadn't stopped him."

Dr. Rollins nodded and made a few more notes. "And he wasn't like this before?"

Vicki shook her head. "No."

"Is he suffering from new stress at his job?"

"No. Dr. Rollins, the only new thing in Kevin's life is Mina ... but we both know he finds her ... stressful."

"Is he drinking? Taking any drugs?"

"Not that I know of, but—Kevin's been so short-tempered, and he's spending more time at the office than he does at home." Shrug. "I really couldn't say." Vicki sniffed. "He's been changing so quickly—it's scaring me."

Dr. Rollins put his pen down once



more. "I confess that your husband has been most persistent lately. He's disregarded my office hours, and hasn't listened to any advice he's been given. He does seem to be becoming more and more unreasonable."

"Yes," agreed Vicki, "he does. And he was so very, very angry when he left."

Dr. Rollins sighed, and nodded slightly. "Mrs. Lewis, you should notify Family Services. Let them know that Kevin's gone—they'll put a bulletin out for him. In his highly agitated state, it's important that we prevent him from doing something inappropriate or harmful to himself or someone else. I'll make him a priority.

We'll evaluate him, discuss options with him. If he's unreceptive to our recommendations, I assume that you'd be willing to authorize treatment on his behalf."

"Of course," said Vicki.

"From what you've told me, and from what I've seen of his rapid decline, I would suggest that some measure of behavioral modification might be in order." Dr. Rollins smiled. "Mrs. Lewis, we'll see to it that you'll get all the help we can give you ... you, Mina, and Kevin. Whatever it takes, we'll help your family to be whole again."

Vicki leaned back in the chair, a smile on her face. "That's all that matters." ❀

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:** ROBYN HERRINGTON moved to Calgary from South Australia in 1978. Her work has appeared in *Talebones*, *Parsec*, and the DAW anthology, *Return of the Dinosaur*. She is an active member of two online writing groups. Her addiction to writing is followed closely by an addiction to glass blowing. Bruce, her patient husband of 17 years, recognizes when the Muse has hit and, at those times, does his best to stay out of the way. Her e-mail is: <rmh@ucalgary.ca>, and you can find her on the web at: <<http://www.ucalgary.ca/~rmherrin>>.

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# Wild Things

Eileen Kernaghan

out of the midnight forest  
they follow you home like shadow  
they live in your walls and rafters  
in forgotten backs of cupboards

you know their shapes  
but will not name them

their shrill cries haunt you

you can sing small songs to soothe them  
make them soft and secret beds to lie in

still you will wake in winter dawns  
to find them crouched upon your pillow  
their sharp claws unravelling  
the frayed edges of your dreams

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:** EILEEN KERNAGHAN has published three adult fantasy novels set in bronze-age Europe. The second in the series, *Songs from the Drowned Lands*, won the Casper Award (later renamed the Aurora) for 1983-84. *Dance of the Snow Dragon*, a young adult fantasy with a Tibetan Buddhist background, was released by Thistledown Press in 1995. Eileen's short stories and poems have appeared in a number of anthologies, including *The Year's Best Fantasy & Horror*, *Northern Stars*, *Ark of Ice*, and several of the *Tesseract* anthologies. She is also one-fifth of the poetry group Quintet, whose first collection, *Quintet: Themes & Variations*, has just been released by Ekstasis Editions.



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# Alexandrite

Shirley Barr

*illustrated by Lynne Taylor Fahnestalk*

*Cleo Five sat dreaming in the rose and lilac mists of an Alexandrian twilight. A little clockwork snake twined around her wrist, green and gold. Its tongue flickered like an electric filament.*

The sun hung like a perfect carnelian between the blue breasts of Nut the Sky Mother. Nut's misty veils drifted over the pyramids, minarets, and rocket ports of New Cairo. The delicate scent of flowering jasmine rose from the gardens, alternating with the wave of raw sewage from the outgoing tide.

The passage of sunset was measured by the ring on Cleo's finger. She called it the Alexander stone, and it changed from violet to the sea green of afternoon, to neon rose like a synthetic ember.

Mark gave her the ring in the bazaar that afternoon. "An alexandrite for an Alexandrite," he joked.

"Alexandrian," she started to say. She thought better of it. After all, she lived in Alexander's City. She supposed she might be called an Alexandrite. His hand rested on her linen skirt, dark hair curled over the knuckles. She managed not to flick it away with her fly whisk.

"It works like a light meter, Cleo," he said. "Can I call you Cleo? We don't have to take this rigmarole too seriously?"

Such strange words. Such strange garments they wore in Rome these days, body-fitting tubes of scratchy woolen cloth with thin stripes like a Bedouin.

She despaired of civilizing these raw new Romans. Mark spoke no Greek and not even crude Latin. He did not know how to bargain. He paid too much for the tourist's trinket. Strangely, she was touched by the gift. She had never been sentimental.

The violet haze deepened, wrapped the city in an imperial toga. A white flare swept the harbor, thick with oared galleys. The sea did not look quite right. It was not the beam of the famous lighthouse, but the jets of a rocket that melted

the talcum sands into glass.

At night Alexandria woke. A line of grey donkeys filed along the shore, harnesses jingling. Cleopatra lifted her voice, resonant as a gong, to call Charmion. She gathered her mantle of night-black silk, the scarlet hem of her milk-white gown. It was time to prepare for her evening reception.

She put aside the accounts. They were astonished when she called for the tablets of moving figures. As if they should not have to account for the bills from the Persian merchants who carpeted her palace with roses, for the rents from the fig orchards.

The donkeys delivered milk in large round-bottomed jars to a door in the garden wall. The lad who drove the team emptied the last jar into the green jasper pool. With crimped love-locks and fawnlike eyes, he might have somersaulted out of an ancient mosaic of a Cretan bullfight.

Cleopatra watched his movements approvingly. She thanked him in classical Greek. That was the gift the gods had given her instead of beauty, a musical voice and the ability to speak to every man in his own language. He bowed and turned away, removing the heavy jars as if they were a clutch of empty wine skins.

Charmion, a sulky peasant girl from New Cairo, tested the temperature of the bath. Her stocky body strained the tunic of painted fish scales. She sniffed suspiciously. The thick white liquid was synthetic. The mare's milk had soured once, left the palace smelling like a cheese factory.

Cleopatra stepped down the three steps of green jasper into the thick white liquid. Lying back in the perfumed bubbles, she considered the

state banquet. Her entrance must be dramatic and memorable. She was famed for it. Julius would be there, sophisticated and witty, in his laurel leaves. And that lovable lunk Mark, dressed like the god of wine. She supposed she must finally choose one of them. Which one?

A flash of memory. She was wrapped in a roll of silk and hot darkness. The merchant hawked his wares about the palace hall. A raucous shout as one of the soldiers glimpsed the toes of her sandals in the gold fringe when it unrolled with a flourish.

The shushing of the rug unrolling, memory unraveling. She spun through darkness onto icy marble. She rose up from the woven mosaic, a boy clad as a young centurion. The ornamental dagger was sharp enough, if things went dangerously awry.

Julius, golden leaves on his balding skull, was laughing, saluting her audacity. She rose up from a field of woven flowers, a nymph in a Greek tunic, every pleat and curl exact. She rose up, perfumed, under seven veils as stark naked as a slave on the block, from a roll of bedding. No, that was wrong; she would never have been such a fool.

Cleopatra closed her eyes, remembering another entrance. She had been carried in to greet Mark on a gilded boat shaped like a cockle, like Venus. It had been a tight fit when they made love. But no, that wasn't the way it had been. Her throne was her silver trireme, gilded oars flashing in unison, hypnotic as a heartbeat. Lebanon cedars glided past and the air was green wine.

A crack opened in the ceiling. Her soul's eye, her Ka, saw beyond. Not

a memory but a dream place where she had been last night. The embalming temple was filled with white light, vats bubbling with salts and solutions. Rows of white slabs draped with lined displayed rigid mummies lying under coverlets of metallic foil.

They all looked exactly like Cleopatra. They ranged from her fair coloring to amber, olive, and shocking ebony. The embalmers wore stiff white tunics. They bent over one of the slabs, muttering together. Cleopatra recognized her apothecary. The wizened little man brewed toxins and tested antidotes to forestall assassins and execute criminals.

"We might as well discontinue the fair Macedonian. Most of our customers order the cinematic brunette model."

"I thought the point was that it was supposed to be absolute genuine."

"That nouveau-riche gangster was the last to order the genuine fair Greek. And he was surprised that she was blonde. He took it rather well. She could never have a child, of course. We've taken out the cradle, but left the playpen intact." They all laughed together over this.

Cleopatra put her hands over her womb. She remembered a child not yet born. If Julius had no son, what was the point of it all? To conquer the world and leave no heir? What would become of such a world?

"But there's something wrong with the clones." Clones? she thought idly, twigs? As if cuttings from the tree of Ptolemy could be grafted like apple branches. To what?

"One escaped by sea. We found her footprints on the beach. One died by snakebite. We never found the

snake. It would take a cobra five feet long to have that much venom. No little viper would do, no agonizing convulsions. She wanted an easy death, a pretty corpse."

"It couldn't have been one of those whistling asps in the bazaar. It must have been poison in a ring, a comb. We have to modify the programming. Remember the uproar when the last one ran off to sell onions in the bazaar? It would have caused more scandal to reclaim her."

"She's too much like the original. She can't have the original memories, of course. It's all in the memory chip. It just needs to be fine tuned."

"But her brain would work the same way, wouldn't it? The talent for languages, the showmanship. Cleopatra was a queen, after all. This was the fate she died to escape. An exhibit in some conqueror's procession. The bite of the royal cobra gave immortality."

Cleopatra shook off the memory, the vivid recurring dream. She could not afford indecision. She had so many more things to think of. Julius' son and Mark's twins asleep in the palace nurseries. The price of olives and fish. She rose and Charmion wrapped her in fresh linen.

Tonight they would arrive together. Julius, thin as a rapier in his purple toga, and Mark, not as refined as Julius, not as rich. He laughed more, drank more, and was more fun.

When had she begun playing these whore's tricks? Rolling out of rugs, drinking crushed pearls, flaunting her lavish lifestyle to attract powerful investors? The theatrics of the girl queen had been a matter of survival. But it had become a habit. She felt too old for it suddenly.

Cleopatra sat down at her ivory dressing table. Little stone jars held cosmetics. In the bronze mirror her skin seemed clearer than yesterday, younger. She stroked sparkling galena on her eyelids and blended ochre, harsh as brick dust, into a maiden's blush.

It was a dreadful mess and difficult to put on. Rich men who paid good credits to pull like vidfilm slaves at the oars of reproduction triremes wanted everything authentic.

But not the perfumes, in their ruby minarets. Sweet cyprium from henna flowers, olibanum from Arabia, distilled roses from Persia, were too cloying for modern tastes. The scents came from the embalming place.

Once, Charmion had accidentally cracked the fragile neck of a perfume flask. The girl had fallen into a fit. The white priests had rushed her away. She had come back sullen and slow-witted.

Cleopatra waved away the ruby vial. She reached for a little jar, green with corrosion: attar of roses, cedar, and myrrh she distilled herself. Charmion combed out her hair and pinned it under an azure wig.

Cleopatra popped in the contact lenses that made her eyes look like emeralds, the way Julius had liked them. "The pearls, my lady?" Charmion asked. Cleopatra hesitated. The Indian pearls were as large as quail's eggs. They were milky green from the pollution in the oyster beds. She once drank her earring dissolved in wine. That impressed him with her wealth and insolence.

She fingered one of the drops regretfully. "The emeralds," she decided.

"Peridots or beryls?" Charmion

demanded.

There were blue-green scarabs in wide collars and strands of leaf green peridots suspending a heavy moon pendant. Evening emeralds in her day. Again that fleeting thought, gone before she could remember it. Why in her day? Wasn't this her day?

What if she sent them all away? What if she retired and lived off her rents and market investments? What if she summoned back the doe-eyed lad in the tiny loin-cloth? But he had gone home to the little onion seller from the bazaar.

Before she finished thinking it, Charmion zipped her into a golden sheath as hermetic as a mummy case. The whole surface of it was embossed with rows of white ears, garter snakes and lightning bolts. The hieroglyphs had no meaning; they had been re-copied so many times, the meaning was lost, rearranged into a pleasing design.

As the pattern of her own life had been rearranged. She was growing younger, living her life backwards. She was almost ready to greet the conqueror who would disembark from the Roman trireme in the harbor. An eager virgin with all her experience intact.

"And the snake," she said. "The real one, from the tomb." It wrapped her whole arm, heavy articulated gold. It felt alive.

Cleopatra rose. Charmion opened a door of tortoiseshell set with emeralds. She did not have to walk: the metallic floor carried her smoothly to her sphinx throne in the banquet hall. The tables were laid with golden ware and emerald goblets. Blond and black slaves lit hanging lamps shaped like



stars and crescents.

It was all show and tinsel. From the kitchens came the odors of wild boar roasted whole, trout simmered in a paste of ground pearls, fist-sized truffles, honeyed baklava crusted with gold leaf.

She thought she could give her visitors a sensation to eclipse all her other entrances. She stroked the serpent that circled her wrist. Its secret was undiscovered. If she pressed the garnet eyes together just so, two iron fangs would dart out, discolored with venom. The poison had been brewed by that other apothecary in the real Alexandria. He had been the first test of its efficacy.

The dream was true and all the rest was false. This was not the real Alexandria and this was not Year Thirty Before the Common Era. Somehow they had cheated her, brought her here for some conqueror's triumph. Only the golden cobra, the queen's death, was perfect, poetic, legendary.

It was like the prick of a rose thorn, unfelt until the surprise of the ruby drop welling. It left two puncture marks, like a brooch pin.

This is how a queen dies. Here, without a mark, sitting on her throne in a Pharaoh's jewels, beyond their

reach. How long would it take them to notice this gilded dead queen presiding over their revels?

"Do you hear the music?" she asked Charmion.

The girl shrugged. Under the ground rang the eerie music of flutes and chimes, drums and chanting, going away out of the city gates.

"The flutes and cymbals and the sistra. How can you not hear it? It is the music of the gods, going away. The gods have deserted Alexandria."

As cold fire rushed along her veins, all her sisters waiting to be born knew what she knew. Even the onion seller paused as she put beer and bread on a rough table.

Tall golden portals swung open. The common mob pressed in to the marble hall on tiptoe. The purple and crimson figures of Julius and Mark led the way.

Cleopatra withdrew into the golden mummy case. She watched them all from a distance as if through the eye-holes of a mask. They would never find the snake.

She pressed the glittering eyes again. The gilded cobra retracted its fangs and coiled harmlessly about her arm. 🍁

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: SHIRLEY BARR was born in Peterborough, Ontario, and now lives and writes in Toronto. She has worked for thirteen years in the accounting department of a film distributor. This is her first professional sale.

ABOUT THE ARTIST: LYNNE TAYLOR FAHNESTALK (please see page 5).



# Soaps

by Hazel Hutchins

*illustrated by Adrian Kleinbergen*

*It was a Tuesday when Adele was first drawn into Sands of Time.*

She had been watching soap operas for years, of course, starting when Rob was alive and, after he'd passed away, watching more and more until she could no longer quite recall how she'd passed the afternoons without them.

*Sands* was new. The networks had slipped it in between *Another World* and *Days of our Lives*, which was odd because those two well-established soaps ran back to back and there shouldn't have been room for another, but somehow they managed it. From the first, Adele knew it was going to be one of her favorites.

It had all one wanted in a soap opera—handsome men, beautiful women, clothes to die for, and houses deliciously appointed by interior decorators who favored large floral bouquets and striking entranceways. It had Kendal—tall, suave, rich and (it was strongly hinted) rotten to the core. It had Mark—tall, handsome, promising and (again strongly hinted) haunted by a mysterious past that played across his brow like storm clouds. And between them—Maral.

Maral. Her very name was a delight. (Where *did* they find these names!) She was as slender and delicate as a twisting of hand-blown glass, with beautiful, well-cut hair, expressive eyes, and small hands elegantly adorned with long, carefully painted fingernails.

Adele loved long fingernails. She had grown, shaped, and painstakingly painted her own for years; kept them up still, kept the rest of herself up too, even with Rob gone and the parties, acquaintances, and entertaining that used to mark the seasons of the year departed with him as well. Those things had dropped away with amazing rapidity and now only the small rituals remained—the hairdresser's once a week, the daily application of basic makeup, and the careful choice of her (now) casual clothes in shades that suited her best so that when she sat down in her chair before the TV set in the afternoons she felt balanced, together, perhaps even hopeful.

It was on the hopeful days that she was most likely to talk back to the characters on the screen.

"Look out, Billy!"

"You're a skunk, Jake!"

"Don't listen to him, Victoria!"

Adele did not think it peculiar to hear herself calling out to the TV in this way. Her house was empty of voices for days on end; why should she not fill the void now and then? It wasn't as if she didn't know what she was doing. She admitted it openly—to herself, to her daughter, Claire, who phoned every Sunday from Montreal, to her next door neighbor, Emma, who stopped in once a week to make sure she was still alive.

Emma was a short, round person with a tendency to do good deeds. She claimed not to watch soap operas, but Adele noticed she always arrived five minutes before the start of *Days of Our Lives*.

"How were things in Salem this week?" she would ask cheerfully.

"I keep telling John that Kristin's no good but..." and Adele would give a small shrug of her shoulders and one of her best, knowing smiles, "...he doesn't listen."

Emma would laugh and nod and sneak a peek out of the corner of her eye to see if the show had started yet.

No, it wasn't unusual that Adele found herself talking out loud to the characters on *Sands of Time* as well. There was, however, something that was different. With *Sands*, Adele seemed to be getting a reaction.

The first time, it was a moment of silence. Adele had called out "Watch yourself, Maral!" and there followed a definite pause in the action on screen. It could have been a miscue

among the actors—a stumble, a faltering, even a technical glitch—but still, it was there.

The second time, heads turned toward the camera. What was it she'd said? "You're up to no good, Kendal!" Instantly, everyone on the screen turned to look at the camera and then (surely she was not imagining this) beyond the camera into Adele's own living room. It seemed to be a clouded view for there were indications of squinting and peering. Kendal, however, had looked directly at her and smiled.

The third time, things began to get personal.

"Who is that?" Mark asked.

He and Kendal had been having an argument and Adele had interjected "Kendal, you weasel." Both men turned to look at her.

"The old girl in the chair," asked Mark. "Who is she?"

"No one," said Kendal smoothly. And the screen faded to grey.

No one! The old girl in the chair! Adele was incensed.

"Is that who I've become?" she asked her vanity mirror while readying herself for bed that evening. "The old girl in the chair?"

She decided to take offence at the remarks. She would be part of things no more. Whatever was happening between herself and *Sands* was tenuous in any case. She would stop it here and now. She'd control her outbursts. Withdraw. Conform.

And she did. For almost two weeks she watched TV without a word passing her lips, not during *Sands of Time*, not during any of the soaps. Even Emma noticed it when she made her weekly visit.



"You weren't talking back to them today," she commented.

"No," answered Adele, her lips closing roundly as if she was holding something unpleasant in her mouth.

Emma eyed her carefully.

"You're alone too much, Adele," said Emma. "You should join the seniors center—learn Tai Chi, play bridge."

It was a suggestion Emma had made so often there was no longer any need for Adele to answer. Adele was not a joiner. She did not understand how groups of that sort worked. A party was different; she had always enjoyed the parties to which she and Rob had been invited. She had a funny little knack for catching the best part of the evening, riding on a little bubble of enjoyment that made others feel good as well. "My party girl," Rob had called her in the beginning, but she was not a joiner. She did not wish Emma to worry, however, so she offered her a vodka and tonic and an invitation to stay on for *General Hospital* by way of reassurance.

Her daughter Claire was harder to appease.

"But what did you *do* this week, Mother?" she asked over the long distance line the following Sunday.

Claire was part of a generation that did things and then listed them endlessly as if it was some grand tallying up.

"Just the usual," said Adele patiently. "Everything is all right, Claire. I'm fine."

But, in truth, she was not quite fine. She had begun to worry about something.

*Sands* was not going as expected. Kendal was doing things he was

clearly destined to do and more—winning Maral's trust and affection, separating her from her friends, plotting to merge her business interests into his own, showing signs of blackmailing Mark on future episodes. Maral, however, was blissfully ignorant. She should have been getting small inklings of things to come by this time, subtle foreshadowings, a moment or two of pondering, but she was seeing only stars and bliss. And Mark—Mark was worse than useless. Adele could not figure what was wrong with him. Instead of growing stronger with every episode, he was growing weaker. He might be in love with Maral, but there was not much there for her to love in return. Instead of taking over the company that was Kendal's rival business in town, as indeed Mark's mysterious past suggested he was entitled to do, he had opened a garage. A garage!

"How wonderful for you!" Maral had offered when Mark told her, but Adele could tell she didn't mean it.

Meanwhile, Kendal had begun yet another phase of the game. Another woman had caught his eye, not one worthy of marriage but a sideline interest. There was nothing concrete yet, but Adele could see it building—the meaningful looks, the casual but intensely intimate brushing of hands. Oh yes, Adele could see it clearly and it angered her in ways Kendal's business duplicities did not. Already, even before they were married, he was on the move. Day after day, Adele sat fuming in her chair, her emotions barely contained.

That fateful Tuesday, when Kendal paused on the front steps of his elegant family home to wipe lipstick

from his cheek before sweeping in to meet Maral (conveniently waiting there for him) with some trumped-up excuse, Adele could no longer control herself.

"Liar!"

Both of them turned to look at her and this time, Adele knew, she had gone too far. She knew it because things were happening. The world was shifting, moving beneath her feet. Kendal, after the briefest moment of hesitation, was moving too. He was moving toward her, walking toward her, walking toward her with—and this was odd, odd but a relief too—with a charming smile and outstretched arms.

"Aunt Adele!" he said. "When did you arrive?"

Aunt Adele! The words were spoken aloud to Adele's own ears, not amplified through a TV speaker. The screen between them had dissolved. Adele's own living room had changed, shifted, metamorphosed into this other room, this room of dark walls and decorative doorways and floral bouquets. She smelled new carpet and oil on fine wood. Headily it swept into her senses. And here was Kendal crossing toward her, Kendal who was a rotter and had been fooling Maral all along but now she could understand why. It was like an aura around him, strength and control and power, the sheer physical beauty of the man.

She was standing. (Had Kendal drawn her from her seat? Had she been standing all along?) He took her hand and raised it gallantly to his lips.

"How wonderful!" he announced.

Adele felt the softness of his lips like a butterfly on the back of her

hand, saw the shock of heavy brown hair as he bowed over it, caught the scent of cologne. Did she also catch a glimmer of pure craftiness in his eyes?

Still holding her hand, he turned to Maral.

"Darling, let me introduce you to my renegade aunt who thinks one is not working unless one is behind a desk with six phones ringing and a secretary taking dictation!"

And there was Maral, alive and in person, beautiful Maral, in her well-tailored suit and heavy gold earrings, reaching out an elegant, long-nailed hand in greeting.

It was heady stuff such as Adele had not felt for many years, the man's hand lightly on her elbow, the beautifully appointed room, Maral's eyes easily upon her. And here she was in the middle of it, back in the middle of things but better than it had ever been before, richer (Rob's financial success paling next to this), and herself central this time. All eyes upon her. She could feel her role being written as she stood there, the strong, knowing aunt, the matriarch of the family. The viewers would be wondering, is she good or is she bad? Will she be on Kendal's side or will she be made of sterner stuff?

The sheer power of it swept through her senses. With a few words she could expose Kendal, could save Maral, could turn the story line dramatically and exit with a majesty that would long be remembered.

But I don't have to do it yet, she thought. I can wait a little while. These things go on forever. She could enjoy it a little bit. And after all, did she know, really know Kendal wasn't

doing what was best with Maral's business interests? Did she really know his little side flirtation wasn't just one last fling before he became serious about settling down?

"I'm only keeping my nephew on his toes," she said. "How lovely to meet you Maral."

"How lovely to meet you, Maral."

That night when she was getting ready for bed, she allowed the scene to replay itself again in her head, glancing in the mirror as she spoke the words. A crazy kind of daydream is what it must have been, but daydreams could be so real. Maral and she had taken to each other immediately. It happened sometimes. Adele could think of two or three times over her life with Rob that she and one of the other wives had taken to each other and become fast friends. It never lasted, of course. Rob always had new territory to conquer with Adele at his side as one of his best assets (her engaging party persona, her careful clothes, her beautiful fingernails), and so long as he, too, turned his back on his friendships at the same time (yes, female friendships) it had seemed oddly even; had seemed *enough* so long as Rob was always there, always returned, always Mr. and Mrs. R. A. Heb in a house where the furniture was new with every spring begonias on the patio and every winter a trip to some place warm and, most important of all, every evening someone across the dinner table.

Someone across the dinner table. No matter what else happened, Adele could always count on Rob for that. Until now.

Oh, Emma was right in her fuddled

way, not about the seniors groups and bridge, but just about the aloneness. A cold, unrealized anger that had been hiding beneath the surface rose like some sea monster seeking air. Whatever he had done behind her back in life, it was Rob's death that had been the true betrayal. No longer the parties, no longer someone with whom to go south in the winter, or shopping, or out for supper. It was the day to day contact she missed, the aloneness that might have been eased had she been left one good friend—a friend like Maral.

The next day, most wonderful of small miracles, *Sands* once again drew her in. She and Maral crossed paths again at Kendal's house. There was an invitation to lunch. It seemed she was going to be a daily player—only a bit part, but a player nevertheless.

Adele began dressing up for the encounters—eyeshadow, lipstick, and her clothes more carefully chosen from her closet according to whether the plot might lead them to home, restaurant, or office. Many of the styles were a bit out of date but it didn't seem to matter. If anything, in fact, they seemed to fit in, as if the story itself was slipping back in time or changing to fit her needs. When Emma dropped by (it had been two weeks since she'd last been over, a sick sister having taken priority over Adele in the good deed roster), she looked at Adele's clothes in surprise and asked where she was going.

Adele had forgotten about Emma.

"Nowhere," said Adele. "I've so many dresses in my closet I thought I'd see if I couldn't put some of them to use—even if they are a bit out of

date."

Reluctantly, she let her neighbor in. Would Emma now be part of things? Adele could not bear for that to be the case, but neither did she dare suggest they miss their shows entirely.

"How were things in Salem while I was away?" asked Emma taking her customary chair.

"I'm not sure," said Adele. She wasn't either, having missed several episodes as *Sands* seemed to daily play itself longer and longer.

Emma leaned forward with concern.

"Have you been ill Adele?"

"No, no. Just watching something on another channel," Adele replied.

Another *World* had finished and a series of advertisements was flickering across the screen. Adele's panic was becoming acute. She could not believe she had let herself get into this situation. Just when she felt she could bear it no longer, the opening line for *Days of Our Lives* rolled from the television. Her spirits soared. Of course! *Sands of Time* was never on when Emma visited—why had she not noticed that before?

Emma was watching the screen, smiling. Adele, leaned back contented, relaxed, confident that the next day *Sands* would return.

And indeed it did. In fact, the next day, Kendal presented Maral with an engagement ring.

A ring. The sight of it jerked Adele back to reality. She had been lulled by the money, the ease, by Kendal's own charm. It was such a pleasant day-dream—she and Maral basking under Kendal's generous hand. She had forgotten that this business between

Maral and Kendal would progress. Even on soap operas, things did eventually progress. And behind Maral's back, the plot had been spinning as expected—Kendal managing Maral's business affairs in devious ways, Kendal blocking Mark at every turn. And always, always, other women.

"It is not my role to interfere," Adele found herself saying to her mirror as she wiped away her makeup that evening. "Maral is a big girl. She will be able to see these things for herself when the time is right. It's not like it used to be. These are modern times. She has a job and a life and a will of her own. If things don't work out, there is always divorce."

But that was not quite correct either, for time did indeed seem to be slipping backward in some mysterious way. Dresses and shoes she had worn in the seventies and sixties didn't just "get by" for Adele's role in *Sands*, they were admired as fashionable. Restaurant decor was from an earlier time. Hairstyles grew bigger and then smaller again. Makeup softened into pastels, rehardened into reds. And once, when she caught a glimpse of a magazine on a table it read August 1955. It was not so easy to get out of a marriage in the fifties. Less acceptable still in the forties. Adele knew these things. She had been there. Maral would have to be told the truth.

Still Adele delayed. All summer she watched and waited and, when given a chance, played her bit part. The story line stretched and relaxed like an elastic band, like five or six elastic bands all intertwined. Sometimes Adele was part of that stretching and relaxing. Other times she



waited and watched.

It was clear Mark loved Maral, but he did not let her know. He did not have the power or the money to compete with Kendal. He did not have the will. And when a friend pointed out the things he did have—his goodness, his decency, his fidelity—Mark's eyes had only darkened.

"It's not enough," he replied. "Adele deserves to have the world."

The world. It was another of Rob's lines. "Together, if we play our cards right, we'll have the world."

Adele was confused. Why were these words crossing over between *Sands* and her real life? Why was Maral wearing her hair styled so much like Adele herself had once worn her own? Why had she taken Adele shopping for her wedding dress, and then not shown it to her? Why were her dreams so full of Kendal and Mark and Rob and someone she could not quite see?

It was a fall wedding—that should have been enough for her to guess. The churchyard had been graced with a real tree in fall colors and it didn't take much imagining to fill in the clean blue of an autumn sky that would photograph so well in the wedding pictures. But she did not guess. It was not until she stepped into the church itself and saw the congregation that she realized the truth. It was as if her own wedding were happening again: the same church, the same minister standing at the front. A doppelganger of her own mother was sitting in the front pew. A double of Rob's family was sitting across the aisle.

"Bride or groom?" asked the usher.

Adele stood transfixed. Whose side

was she on?

She allowed herself to be led to a pew sufficiently to the rear of the church to fall into the undecided category. The wedding music began. A young girl in a pale green dress—Angela, her own friend Angela (where was she now? best friends for always but Rob soon put a stop to that: Angela had not fit in with their future) walking up the aisle. Behind her the bride—that gorgeous wedding dress on which her parents had splurged to make her worthy, the bride's face hidden beneath the veil. Whose face? Maral's? Her own? Did it matter? There, on the arm of a man looking so much like her father that she could smell the closeted air of his only suit and feel the rough fabric against her skin, was a small elegant hand adorned with long curved fingernails painted pearl and beautiful. Kendal tall and beautiful at the altar, the most fine looking of grooms. Kendal, or was it Rob, the faces blurring into each other ever and always till death do us part.

Where was Mark? There. Adele spotted his back. The sandy hair, the quiet shoulders. She knew even before his head turned to see the bride that it was not Maral's Mark standing there in the church, but someone she herself had once known a long time ago, a lifetime ago. Kind. Trusted. Steady. The scent of motor oil lingering even when he took her out.

"But what did you *do* all week, Mother?"

What Claire did not understand was that back then girls like Adele did not *do* anything. They married their futures. They stayed the course. Afterwards, if there was an afterwards,

there was not always the energy to shift in untried directions.

The bride had reached the front of the church. She was handed to the groom. Panic thumped madly in Adele's chest. Whoever it was beneath the veil would not be happy. She would pretend to be happy, she would try to be happy, she would think she was happy—but she would not be. She was not brave enough to go it alone, it was not the time to go it alone, but there was another answer.

"Stop!" cried Adele.


All faces turned to look at her—a lifetime of faces it seemed, a lifetime of faces real and imagined and all waiting.

"Write it again," said Adele. "It's wrong. It'll turn out wrong. Use Mark instead."

Like a whirlwind the church collapsed around her. The church and the cameras and the living room too, her own living room, collapsing, changing, metamorphosing again. The rows of fine china—gone. The bureau of mahogany—gone. The sofa and rugs and chairs all gone and in

their place a worn shag, a sofa covered by a flowered throw, an old man with grease worked deep into the creases of his hands snoring gently in a recliner, a baby with a half drunk bottle and a T-shirt reading "I love Grampa" resting in the crook of his arm, a cat curled on the TV, a dog looking out the window, an imitation fireplace with a mantle across which was strewn a forest of photographs of family and friends (surely that one looked almost like Claire, a softer, gentler Claire), the children growing with every installment taller, sleeker, more defined; the adults growing shorter, rounder, more disheveled until she found herself looking at just one photo, too grandmotherly for words, a too-tight perm, a dress that did not quite fit, and a pair of hands with short, unpainted fingernails.

Adele looked down. Yes, there they were, those same hands, the nails cracked, uneven, and unpainted.

In the last few moments, before she truly became the owner of those hands, she heard someone whisper "What have I done?" 

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:** HAZEL HUTCHINS can be found in "Soaps" as the character who claims not to watch them but always shows up on the soap fan's doorstep just as one is about to begin. She mostly writes for children, only straying into the world of big kids if there is sufficient fun to be had.

**ABOUT THE ARTIST:** ADRIAN KLEINBERGEN has been described as a self-styled Renaissance man. Besides drawing and painting, he has added sculpture, caricature, writing, costuming, jewelry-making, and music composition to his repertoire of superhuman skills. He also does artwork on commission, draws and inks comics professionally, and is a cosmically cool guy. (Hands, too.)

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**Trader**, Charles de Lint (Tor, Feb/97)  
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**Shadow of Ashland**, Terence M. Green (Tor, Jan/96)  
**Frameshift**, Robert J. Sawyer (Tor, June/97)  
**Illegal Alien**, Robert J. Sawyer (Ace, Dec/97)

## MEILLEUR LIVRE EN FRANÇAIS (1996-97)

**Corps-machines et rêves d'anges**, Alain Bergeron (Vents d'Ouest, 97)  
**Coeur de fer**, Joël Champetier (Orion, 97)  
**L'Odyssée du Pénélope**, Jean-Pierre Guillet (Héritage, 97)  
**Nelle de Vilvêq**, Francine Pelletier (Aire, 97)  
**Aboli**, Esther Rochon (Aire, 96)  
**Le Jeu de la perfection**, Élisabeth Vonarburg (Aire, 96)

## BEST SHORT-FORM WORK IN ENGLISH (1997)

**"The PlayTime Case"**, David Chato (*On Spec* Win/97)  
**"Divisions"**, Eric Choi (*Tesseracts*<sup>6</sup>)  
**"Three Hearings on the Existence of Snakes in the Human Blood Stream"**, James Alan Gardner (*Asimov's*, Feb/97)  
**"The Fishmonger's Emeralds"**, Katie Harse (*Tesseracts*<sup>6</sup>)  
**"The Watley Man and the Green-Eyed Girl"**, Eileen Kernaghan (*TransVersions* #7)  
**"The Hand You're Dealt"**, Robert J. Sawyer (*Free Space*, Tor)  
**"Spirit Dance"**, Douglas Smith (*Tesseracts*<sup>6</sup>)  
**"Prescribed Burn"**, Jena Snyder (*Tesseracts*<sup>6</sup>)

## MEILLEURE NOUVELLE EN FRANÇAIS (1997)

**"La Voyeuse"**, Manon Brunet (*imagine...* 78)  
**"Badelaire l'assassin"**, Joël Champetier (*Concerto pour six voix*, Médiaspaul)  
**"Une lettre de ma mère"**, Yves Meynard (*Solaris* 121)  
**"Dans ses yeux une flamme"**, Daniel Sernine (*Entre voisins*, Pierre Tisseyre)  
**"Fictions et fantascience"**, Jean-Louis Trudel (*Solaris* 121)

## BEST OTHER WORK IN ENGLISH (1997)

**"Firewall"**, *ReBoot* episode 3.1.3 (Mainframe Entertainment, Inc)  
**Northern Frigths 4**, Don Hutchison, ed. (Mosaic Press) (anthology)  
**On Spec**, sf magazine (Copper Pig Writers' Society)  
**Parsec**, sf magazine (Parsec Publishing Co)  
**"Sandoval's Run"**, *Earth: Final Conflict* episode 112

(Atlantis Films, Baton Broadcasting, Roddenberry/Kirschner Productions, Tribune Entertainment)

**Tesseracts**<sup>6</sup>, Robert J. Sawyer & Carolyn Clink, eds. (Tesseract Books) (anthology)

**TransVersions**, sf magazine (Island Specialty Reports)

## MEILLEUR OUVRAGE EN FRANÇAIS (AUTRE) (1997)

**"Un baiser dans le noir — Quand Stephen King se fait nouvelliste"**, Guy Sirois (*Stephen King: Trente ans de terreur*, Alire)  
**imagine...**, Paul-G. Croteau/Jean-Marc Gouanvic, réd. (Les Imaginoïdes) [77/78]  
**Hughes Morin**, editor/directeur (*Stephen King: Trente ans de terreur*, Alire)  
**Solaris**, Hughes Morin, réd. (Les Compagnons à temps perdu)  
**Élisabeth Vonarburg**, critiques (*Solaris* 120-123)

## ARTISTIC ACHIEVEMENT

|                            |                              |
|----------------------------|------------------------------|
| <b>James Beveridge</b>     | <b>Edward Charpentier</b>    |
| <b>Yves Crepeau</b>        | <b>Janet L. Hetherington</b> |
| <b>Jean-Pierre Normand</b> | <b>Larry Stewart</b>         |
| <b>Ronn Sutton</b>         |                              |

## FAN ACHIEVEMENT (FANZINE)

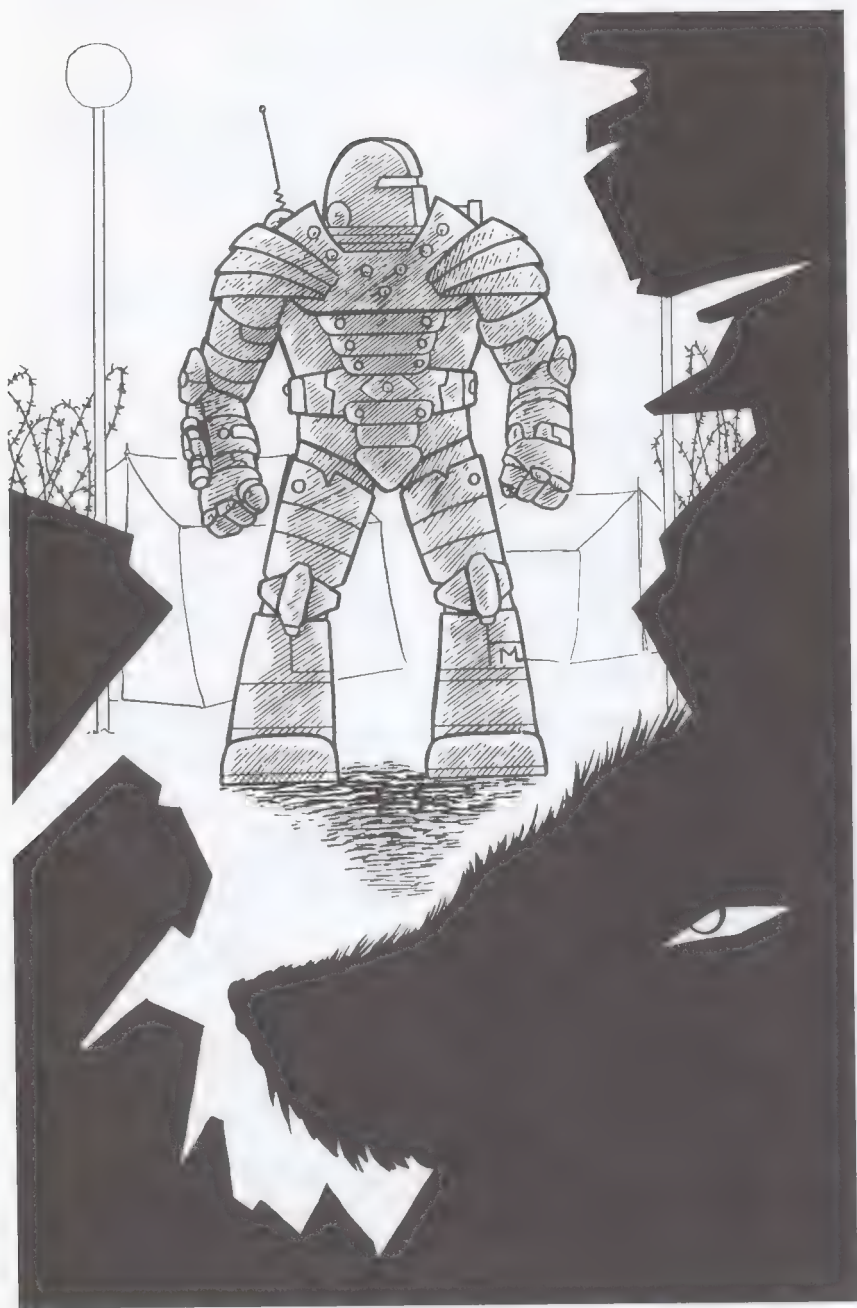
**A Little Enlightenment**, Chris Chartier, ed. (Btfoq)  
**OSFS Statement**, M. B. Wadsworth, ed. (Ottawa SF Society)  
**Sol Rising**, Theresa Wojtasiewicz, ed. (Friends of the Merril Collection)  
**The Space Cadet Gazette**, R. Graeme Cameron, ed.  
**Warp**, Keith Braithwaite, ed. (MonSFFA)  
**Warp Factor**, Chris Chartier, ed. (Warp 9)

## FAN ACHIEVEMENT (ORGANIZATION)

**Chris Chartier** (Warp 9 and/et British Television Fanclub of Quebec)  
**Andrew Gurudata** (Pharos Project)  
**Peter Halasz** (The National SF & Fantasy Society)  
**Cindy Huckle** (Primedia)  
**Ann Methe** (Con\*cept)  
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**R. Graeme Cameron** (CUFF)  
**Gary Hilson** (Canadian SF & Fantasy Resource Guide website) ([www.connect.ab.ca/~garyh/cansfrg](http://www.connect.ab.ca/~garyh/cansfrg))  
**Charles Mohapel** (Hollyweird column/chronique)  
**Lloyd Penney** (fan-writing/écriture fanique)  
**Larry Stewart** (entertainer/personnalité amuseur) ♣





# Wild Thing

Randy Barnhart

*illustrated by Murray Lindsay*

*The water purifier banged away all night, but the noise was a homey comfort to Survey Team A-5. Hansom III's permafrost prevented groundwater from percolating through the top soil, creating a waterlogged mire of stagnant water that went on for kilometers. Drinking anything the purifier hadn't touched could mean spending a few days in the latrine, if not sick bay. The water purifier was the team's best friend, and any noise it wanted to make, morning, noon, or night, was just fine with them.*

Jack Dawes was trying to catch a few minutes extra sleep, but one of Lewiston's Combat Pioneers popped his head through the tent flap and announced, "It's 05:00, sir. The colonel says he'd like a chat with you before your people get going."

*Jeez, Dawes thought as he groaned and tried to burrow back into his sleeping bag, a chat with Lewiston at 05:00! Just what I need over morning coffee!*

An inhuman scream finally jarred him awake. The Combat Pioneer reappeared and said, "Oh yeah, Dr. LaRocca's having some kind of fit, and the colonel wants to know what you're going to do about it, being Team Leader and all."

*Cathy, he thought, it would have to be Cathy. I was hoping to have a few hours before I had to deal with her.*

Jack threw back his sleeping bag and instantly began shivering. Hansom III was just wrapping up a glacial period and the nights were brutally cold. It would warm up around noon, local time, but for the next few centuries, polar-weight gear would be common breakfast attire.

Stepping from his tent, Dawes looked around his kingdom. The terrain had

been thoroughly worked over by the continual movement of huge glaciers and was as flat as a table top. Here and there, islands of immense boulders huddled, dusted a light red by the omnipresent lichen, marking the passage of the retreating ice sheets. So far, the lichen was the only life more complex than bacteria that Team A-5 had found; the team botanist, Tony Murphy, was having a high old time, insisting "Murphy's Lichen" was the only real biological find of any importance to be made on Hansom III. Dawes, though, had already spotted a few things that had given him hope.

As he shuffled around looking for Cathy, Dawes glanced at the barbed wire and gun emplacements that the Pioneers had erected within minutes of landing. *Jesus wept!* he thought *No wonder we haven't found anything more advanced than lichen. This nonsense would scare away a polar bear!*

Suddenly, Dawes heard another scream, followed by an outpouring of abuse that would have made a cop blush. Cathy was working out her frustrations about this most screwed-up of all survey missions by venting her spleen on the colonel's little play-toys. He had to get her under cover before one of the Combat Pioneers decided to quiet her down.

He finally found Silent Cathy LaRocca, the micro-climatologist, standing in the center of one of the colonel's searchlights, screaming profanity and shaking her fist at the heavens. Tall and thin, she was one of the quiet ones, generally relying on grunts and body language to get her ideas across. When she spoke in anger, murder was about to be done, and if she was actually screaming at the

colonel's handiwork, Dawes was going to have to ask her to turn in the knife from her survival kit. Again.

Finished with her abuse for the moment, Cathy ambled over. Dawes shook his head and mournfully asked, "Cathy, just what the hell are you doing? Here I am, fifteen years a senior field biologist with the survey and two years to retirement, and I have to put up with a mission that would have driven Jesus to homicide! Why do you have to make it just that much worse?"

Silent Cathy shrugged and walked to the mess tent. As they neared the entrance, Dawes motioned for her to be quiet, but as he pushed open the flap, Cathy could not resist one last dig at her target for the day. "When the Dino-Killer hit the earth," she said in a voice that could be heard for miles, "I'm sure some of those T-Rexes reacted just like the colonel and his people." She looked around the mess tent and continued, "You know, thrashing about and ripping up the landscape even while they were dying out."

Inside, the colonel and his people stopped dead and stared at Cathy, giving Dawes a chance to duck over to the chow line for his usual morning cup of coffee. If he was very lucky, the colonel hadn't seen him enter with Cathy. Dawes made a stab at grabbing what breakfast he could and retreating back to his tent, but the colonel spotted him and, in a voice that demanded immediate obedience, called out, "Dawes. Let's chat."

Dawes slumped in the seat across from Colonel Daniel Lewiston and studied the soldier over the rim of his coffee cup. He knew a few military

types, mostly field engineers brought along on surveys to build permanent research facilities, but the colonel was something else again. Lewiston looked the classic soldier, tall and well-muscled with a demeanor that brooked no argument, but he was no by-the-book moron. He was as strong and sharp and scary as a curved-blade scalpel, and Dawes felt a stab of jealousy: even on the very best day in his life, he knew that he could never be considered either intrepid or mighty.

The colonel smiled, trying for the soft approach. "Dawes, I know we haven't gotten off to a good start," he began as Dawes blew on his coffee, "and Dr. LaRocca's little skit just now couldn't have helped matters much. On the other hand, the Colonial Authority has given both of us our orders, and we can but obey." He flashed a brilliant smile to show that it was all in good fun and Dawes should just play along.

Dawes grunted, and the colonel continued. "You know, the Combat Pioneers were formed to fight the First Interplanetary War, which everyone expected would happen sooner or later. After a century of looking, though, all you people have found are some interesting but relatively harmless flora and fauna. Budget cuts being what they are, we need to find some militant sapients willing to fight a real war very soon, or that's all she wrote for the Combat Pioneers."

With half of his coffee gone, Dawes relaxed and took in Lewiston's shining teeth. Back home, Dawes had to pay at least some lip service to the Authority's orders, but in the field, it would take a week for the colonel to receive an answer to any complaint

he might make. *In for a penny, in for a pound*, he thought, so he said, "Colonel, just because you're still waiting on killer aliens is no reason the Planetary Survey has to make a place for you. No offense, but what I really need right now is a paleontologist to look for traces of pre-glacial life, not a bunch of guys skilled in the maintenance and operation of Battle Armor..." Dawes smiled broadly, trying to show he could go along with all the good fun.

Lewiston's smile slowly turned into glittering ice, and he leaned across the table into Dawes' face. "Listen to me, Dawes: I didn't volunteer us for this mission because we're suckers for your overblown rep. The Jack Dawes I heard about was supposed to be this hard charger who brought back Survey Teams from situations that should have produced nothing but a lot of body bags. Almost every major planet surveyed in the last decade has your name on it somewhere. Yet all I see is some lazy moron knocking back his morning coffee like he hadn't a care in the world." He leaned back and continued, "Let me put it succinctly: the survival of the Combat Pioneers in the next round of budget cuts depends on how well my people perform on this survey. If I start losing bodies to the bureaucrats, I'll start kicking some serious butt."

Dawes could feel rage working its way up from the pit of his stomach, but just before things really got down and dirty, the rest of his team started filtering in for breakfast. They were all good people and experts at their jobs, but the tension between the team and the Combat Pioneers was almost palpable and they didn't need to see the

"leadership" acting like a pair of testosterone-enriched bull elk right now. He leaned across the table and whispered, "We don't need to stress the team any more than it already is. We'll talk about this tonight. Do we understand each other?" Lewiston stared in Dawes face and nodded almost imperceptibly, as if to say *Anytime*.

Dawes waited a few minutes to be sure everyone had some coffee and chow before clearing his throat: "Welcome to Hansom III, Garden Spot of the Colonial Authority!" Everyone had complained bitterly about Hansom III's harsh arctic weather before bedding down the night before, so that got some welcome laughs.

"As you know, we've got a double mission here," he continued. "Team A-5 will be doing its usual wonderful job, surveying this planet to see if it can be added to the Authority's list of possible settlement sites." He looked around and, seeing that they were finally settling down, continued. "The air and water surveys indicate that there's more than a little bacteria floating around, and of course there's the red lichen..."

"Murphy's Lichen!" Tony interjected, drawing a laugh from the scientists.

Dawes waited for the tittering to cease before continuing. "So anyway, we've got our work cut out for us. Colonel Lewiston and his people have their own plans, and I'm sure that none of us wants to interfere with the other's work, so if we all keep our heads, everything will be fine..." Dawes outlined the survey locations and work schedules, finally wrapping up with "...So, if there's nothing

further, I'm sure Colonel Lewiston would like to say a few words..." *This is it*, Dawes thought, *over the top, as they used to say*.

It was clear to Dawes that Lewiston had two methods for dealing with non-military types: the thousand watt smile and the growl. Going with the smile again, the colonel opened with a bit of reconciliation. "Like Jack just explained to you, we're not here to make your life difficult. Just the opposite." He got up and pointed to a map of the camp pinned to the Mess Tent wall.

"As you can see," he continued, "my people have set up a security perimeter around the camp, including searchlights and several gun emplacements directed by Artificial Intelligence controls..."

*Searchlights and AI-controlled guns!* thought Dawes, *this can't get any better*.

Terry Unker, the team's ecologist, jumped in. "Colonel, the satellite photos don't show any kind of evidence of a sapient race on Hansom III. And the fly-over we did yesterday didn't pick up anything more advanced than the red— Sorry, Murphy's Lichen." One of the soldiers leaped to his feet, but Terry waved the interruption away and continued, "I'm just wondering what the hell all the security is for?" Terry was always a light sleeper his first night on a new planet and the colonel's spotlights only added to his insomnia, so he was ready to argue with anything coming out of Lewiston's mouth.

From his reaction, it was clear to Dawes that the colonel was not used to interruptions. "Security is not just a question of being prepared for what



you can see, but for what you can't see," Lewiston snapped. "You Survey Team people have been lucky up until now, but with the Combat Pioneers at hand, you can be assured that anything you do find will be rendered safe, one way or the other."

The words were barely out the colonel's mouth when the rest of the team let fly. Everyone had something to say about the colonel and his security measures and his Combat Pioneers. *Welcome to the wonderful world of Survey administration.* thought Dawes as he motioned for silence, but even Silent Cathy, who had used up here usual daily ration of venom during her rant, was yelling for Lewiston's attention.

"Silence!" roared Lewiston. Dawes could see that the colonel was turning a dangerous shade of red, as if he were getting ready for a heart attack.

*Oh Lord, my first casualty after fifteen years as a team leader!* Dawes mused. *Where's that defibrillator stored?*

After a few seconds, the colonel managed to regain his composure, but his smile had definitely Gone Somewhere Else. "I see I'm going to have the same approach I had to use with your esteemed leader over there," Lewiston said, nodding at Dawes.

*That's a small favor.* Dawes thought, *At least they'll know I hadn't willingly gone along with this farce.*

"Here's the deal, people," Lewiston continued. "The Combat Pioneers have been ordered to accompany you into the field to ascertain whether we would be useful as a protective force for Planetary Survey Teams in the future. I don't care if you think Hansom

III is as safe as your mama's arms. I have my orders, and I am required to obey them." It was clear to Dawes that Lewiston had the team's attention now, and they all watched his every move as if their lives depended on it.

"In addition to providing camp security, I am also assigning security escorts to each of you individually. As you carry out your work, I'm sure you'll come to appreciate your escorts, if not for the protection they'll afford, then for the company." The colonel waited for the laughter. When none came, he sighed and added, "Your escort's name has been downloaded onto your palmtops. That is all."

His team closer to mutiny than he had ever seen, Dawes cornered Lewiston as everyone filed out of the mess tent. "What exactly do you think you're doing?" he hissed. "Half of this team are pathological loners and the other half just plain hate humanity. It's part of the Survey Team profile. Now you want to stick them with escorts as a make-work project for your people? Look at LaRocca: she's ready to take a blade to whoever you assign to her!" He snorted. "Nope, it ain't happening. I'm pulling the plug on this summer camp right now!"

Lewiston smiled thinly and said, "Read the Mission Profile again. I have, quote, 'the sole responsibility for the security of Planetary Survey Team A-5,' unquote. And in my best judgment, armed escorts are necessary for the security of this team. Good day, Dr. Dawes."

Dawes yanked out his palmtop to check Lewiston's interpretation of their orders. Sure enough, the Security section of the Mission Statement was

flexible enough to excuse any action the colonel cared to take, so long as it could be covered under the very wide blanket of "security." A squad of military lawyers must have gone over those orders with a fine-toothed comb to come up with that interpretation.

While reading the Mission Statement, he noticed that the Incoming Message icon was flashing. Accessing it, he learned that Colonel Daniel Lewiston, Commanding, First Combat Pioneers, was pleased to assign Private First Class Richard Telton, First Combat Pioneers, to escort Dr. John Dawes of the Planetary Survey for the duration of Team A-5's inspection of Hansom III.

*Oh hell! he realized suddenly. I forgot to get Cathy's survival knife!*

PFC Richard Telton appeared to be an easy-going young man, but he immediately made two things clear to Dawes: that his name was Richard (pummeling those attempting crude humor around the theme of "Dick" was Richard's hobby); and he wore battle armor whenever there was a possible combat situation. The huge and bulky suits were not the most useful piece of equipment while on escort duty, but Richard had been ordered to protect Dr. Dawes at all costs. Still, with Hansom now high in the sky, the temperature had rocketed up into the 20s and, like every piece of military equipment since Pharaoh's chariot, the suit's vaunted air conditioning system was not exactly delivering according to specification. It seemed to Dawes that Richard was courting heat stroke, and he didn't look forward to carrying him back to camp.

On top of it all, it was clear from his many attempts to indulge in idle conversation that Richard not only expected him to cooperate in this escort sham, he expected entertainment too. Unfortunately, Dawes was never a very congenial partner, even at the best of times, but now he had to sit motionlessly and silently, staring through an infrared scope. The only time he did speak was to order Richard to "Stop moving around so damn much!" Richard did not take the order particularly well, assuming it to be simply one more proof that the Survey hated the Pioneers.

Clearly not one to give up, Richard tried another conversational gambit. "So, Dr. Dawes, what exactly are you looking for?" he asked.

Dawes sighed and looked up. Oh well.

"Richard, look around and tell me what you see," he said. The grinding of the suit's neck mechanism told Dawes that Richard was playing along.

"Nothing," came the reply. "Nothing but some rocks and a lot of red scrub."

Dawes nodded. "The scrub is called lichen. It's usually found wherever there's a difficult environment. What's odd is that we haven't found anything more advanced than lichen. I've been keeping an eye out, and in the past few hours I've found signs that there might be some kind of small proto-mammals on Hansom III." He turned back to his scope, adding, "Haven't seen any of them yet, but it's an even-money bet that they're out there somewhere."

Richard still hadn't picked up the hint. "What kind of sign?" he asked.

"Chewed up carcasses, stuff like that?"

"Nope," Dawes replied, "droppings and pellets. You know, like rabbit shit back home. A good field biologist can tell more about an animal from its droppings than just about anything else. Now, the droppings I found were no bigger than a microchip, but it tells me that there is something out there. Whatever it is, it's got to be small with a high metabolism in order to survive Hansom's frigid night environment. Our little friends must spend most of the day gorging themselves on lichen and burning it off overnight, when they shiver to keep warm."

Taking Richard's silence for satisfaction, Dawes turned back to the scope, but he only got as far as the focusing knob when Richard asked, "Dr. Dawes, how come you people are so down on the Combat Pioneers? I mean, someday you might need us. Not everything you find will want to hide out in the tall grass..."

Dawes knew Richard would keep chattering until he had something else to occupy his attention, so he said, "Richard, it's not like we really dislike the Combat Pioneers all that much. It's just that, in a lot of ways, what we do is the exact opposite of what you folks do."

Richard had been raised on the heroic adventures of the Planetary Survey, so he knew for a fact that Dawes was talking bullshit. "Now that's just not true, Dr. Dawes. Sure, your people are scientists and all that, but I've followed the work of the Planetary Survey, and I know we're both doing our Jobs for Humanity."

Dawes could hear the capital let-

ters in his voice. "In a lot of ways, Planetary Survey people hate their work," he continued. "Here we are, finding biological species that no one has ever seen before, all so the Authority can decide if a planet meets their settlement guidelines. If it does, the colonists arrive and plow it all under." Dawes sighed. "That's the difference between us: explorers celebrate the newness of it all, while settlers just want to transplant our old mistakes." He sighed. "In a way, the Combat Pioneers are nothing more than settlers..."

Just then, at the top right corner of the scope's viewfinder, two fiery red spots flared. *Gotcha!* Dawes thought. With the little beasties' high metabolism rate, he figured their body temp would show up like a blowtorch against Hansom III's relatively cool ambient temperature. As calmly as he could, Dawes whispered, "Richard, I think I've got something here..."

In retrospect, it was clear that calling Richard's attention to the wee beasties had been his big mistake. In his haste to be a good sport and understand what was going on, Richard turned his head. This of course engaged his armor's neck mechanism, sending out a grinding noise across the plain. Dawes only had time to gasp while the two red spots first froze and then disappeared completely from the scope. He dropped his head into hands and almost sobbed in frustration.

"Where, Dr. Dawes?" asked Richard.

It had not been a fun day. Dawes experience with Richard had been repeated by almost every member of

the team. If it wasn't the infernal din from the battle armor, it was the endless "tough-guy" posturing of the Combat Pioneers. Silent Cathy, in a few choice words, let it be known to all and sundry that she was going out alone tomorrow or she wasn't going at all.

Dinner was a fiasco, with Lewiston straining his teeth to show everyone that all was well, while the team silently signaled their loathing. The Combat Pioneers, wise to the ways of bureaucratic in-fighting, sensibly shoveled back their chow and retired silently to their tents.

Dawes, though, knew nothing could destroy a team faster than internal feuding. The team had to work together, even if it meant putting up with a fool like Lewiston. In a desperate bid to avoid open warfare, Dawes ordered everyone to their tents to work out some sort of report out of the day's meager data. Hopefully, a good night's sleep would settle everyone down a bit.

After a few hours trying to make something exciting out of his "little red spots," Dawes slowly started drifting off into sleep. The palmtop slipped from his hand and, with the water purifier banging away a lullaby, he soon snuggled deep into his sleeping bag and away from the cares of the world. This world, anyway.

The night was suddenly pierced by an ungodly scream. "What the hell...?" Dawes called out as he rolled out of his sleeping bag and reached for his flashlight. *That's not Cathy! If one of those goddamn soldiers is screwing around, he dies hard!* Getting his boots on as quickly as he could, Dawes threw back his tent flap

and raced outside. Instantly, he caught his foot on one of the tent's guy-lines and went sprawling.

When he finally untangled himself, Dawes could see that the Combat Pioneers were just as surprised as he was. Searchlights blazed all over the camp in no particular pattern as the soldiers scrambled to find the source of the scream. The Survey Team was only adding to the confusion by aimlessly pointing their flashlights in every direction.

There it was again, a creepy undulating shriek. *Where the hell is that coming from?* wondered Dawes. One of the soldiers, Richard it looked like, came running over. "Are you okay, Dr. Dawes?" he panted.

Dawes, oddly touched by the kid's concern, replied, "Yeah, I'm all right, but what the hell is all the howling? Did you see anything over at your end of the camp?"

Before Richard could reply, someone finally had enough of the nerve-shattering screeches and, convinced that the killer aliens had finally arrived, tripped the control switch on the camp's automatic defense system.

Almost instantly, two Vulcan chain guns popped up from the gun emplacements and began spraying thousands of armor-piercing rounds per minute into the plains surrounding the camp in a random pattern. Dirt and moss flew everywhere, and the blaring crackle from the guns wiped out all other sounds.

Suddenly, the bullets began smashing into the boulder outcrops and ricocheting back into camp. Team or soldier, everyone hit the ground as rounds began ripping into the tents and smashing equipment.



"Oh Jesus, we're dead!" Unker screamed. Silent Cathy managed to jump on his back, knocking the air out of him.

*Thanks, Cathy,* thought Dawes. *The last thing we need right now is panic.* He began crawling toward the colonel's tent, thinking that if anyone knew how to turn off the mini-guns, it was Lewiston. Richard, convinced that his duty lay in protecting Dawes no matter what, followed.

He only managed to crawl a few feet before the night sky was lit with a terrific glare. *If that's what I think it is, things have just gotten a lot worse.* Dawes lifted his eyes toward the nearby pond, and his heart sank: the ricocheting rounds had found the water purifier and the solar-power generating system. Short circuits sparkled through bullet holes in the casing as the system's automatic repair system tried to bring it back online, but the damage was just too great. Dawes groaned and thought, *Looks like it's dirty water and campfires for us from now until pickup.*

After a few more minutes tearing up the landscape, the mini-guns finally ran out of ammunition and silence returned. Cautiously, people began to shift through the remains of their tents when, without warning, there was that scream again. This time, though, there was no mistaking the source: it was coming from the colonel's tent, directly in front of Dawes.

Dawes and Richard ripped back the downed tent and found Lewiston huddled in a corner, his hands covering his face.

*Oh sweet Jesus!* Dawes thought. *This idiot is really determined to be*

*my first casualty.*

He sent Richard for the first aid kit and, as tenderly as he could, rolled the colonel on his back. A tiny trickle of blood ran from under his hands. Gently, Dawes said, "Come on now, Colonel, I just want to take a little look. How can we help you if we don't know what the problem is?"

Dawes slowly drew back the colonel's hands and revealed the source of his pain: clamped firmly on the colonel's upper lip was a small rodent-like creature. About a centimeter long and brownish-red in color, the wee beastie's teeth had a good grip on the soldierly upper lip and was clearly trying to chew a bite-size piece loose.

Dawes whistled happily and called out, "We've got it!" Everyone came running to see Dawes' latest discovery. Congratulations were tendered and everyone started discussing the creature. "What a beauty! ... I just don't get it; where was the damn thing? ... What are you going to call it, Jack?..."

Finally, Lewiston bellowed, "I don't care what you call it, just get the damn thing off me!"

"Oh, right," replied Dawes. "Someone get me a specimen jar, some formalin, and a scalpel..."

Lewiston's eyes bulged in terror. "Scalpel!? What do you need a scalpel for?" he screamed.

Toward the end, he flailed around so much that Richard finally had to hold him down.

"So it must have been pretty rough?" asked the Chair.

And Jack Dawes replied, "Yes, sir."

Team A-5's survey of Hansom III had not exactly been a failure: after all, it was determined that the planet was able to support human settlers and, since no one had been killed, the Colonial Authority would normally have let things slide. Besides, finding the little critter had been a bit of a nine-day wonder in the scientific press, which reflected nicely on the Authority. Still, the Combat Pioneers' involvement had been something of a washout, and the Authority wanted to make sure that none of that backwash slopped onto their collective lap.

Continuing his report, Dawes said, "Without the water purifier or the solar generating system, things got rough really fast. We managed to rig up a solar still out of some left-over packing plastic, but it froze when someone left it out overnight. We ended up having to boil the water and do what folks in South America and Africa used to do."

"And that was?" the Chair inquired.

"Suffered," Dawes replied. "It was cold and miserable and most of us got sick, but we brought back some nice specimens, and that's all that really counts."

One of the Authority members asked after Colonel Lewiston's health, and Dawes replied, "After I cut the proto-rodent off of his lip, he was none the worse for wear, except for the bite marks. Unfortunately, without power, our field computer's medical aid program wasn't available and we had to rely on old fashioned first aid. Speaking of which, I think Survey

should commend PFC Richard Telton of the First Combat Pioneers. He actually seems to have paid attention during his first aid training and was able to pull us through some of our tighter spots. Anyway, the colonel still had a nasty scar when I last saw him aboard the CAS Muir, but I suppose he can have that taken care of here on Earth."

The Chair sighed happily. "It seems to me," he said, "that unless certain parties shoot their mouths off, we can put this whole incident behind us." He glared at Dawes and said "You agree, Dr. Dawes?"

*Oh well, Dawes thought, we still got the specimen.*

As they all stood up to leave, the Chair decided to be conciliatory and asked, "So, what did you end up calling your little rat? Dawes' Mouse or something?"

Dawes smiled. "No, sir. First, it's not a rat. Size, eating habits, and metabolism place it closer to a Terran Arctic Shrew. As to the name..." He hesitated.

The Chair, sensing that something was up, pressed: "Yes, the name, Dr. Dawes. What did you call the thing?"

And Dawes replied, "It wouldn't have been right to name the creature for me because I wasn't the discoverer of record. No, all the members of Survey Team A-5 agreed that for now and forever, it should be named for its discoverer. It's in all the standard exobiology databases by now: Lewiston's Hansomian Shrew. I'm sure the colonel's very proud." ♣

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:** RANDY BARNHART is a fisheries manager who currently lives in Prince Rupert, B.C., with his beautiful wife, Barb, their lovely daughter, Valerie, and two really cute Miniature Dachshunds (because one is not enough). "Wild Thing" is based on a real event that occurred when the author was working for the Canadian Wildlife Service in the Northwest Territories, but you'll have to guess which parts are true.

**ABOUT THE ARTIST:** MURRAY LINDSAY — Artist's Personal Log: While the freelance illustrating and graphic art business ricochets along in its unpredictable path, I snuck in my television debut as an extra on *Honey, I Shrunk the Kids—the TV Series*. There is an episode involving a science fiction convention. I'm essentially playing myself at this fictional con, as I'm doing what many have seen me do at real cons: selling my buttons. It was a hoot.



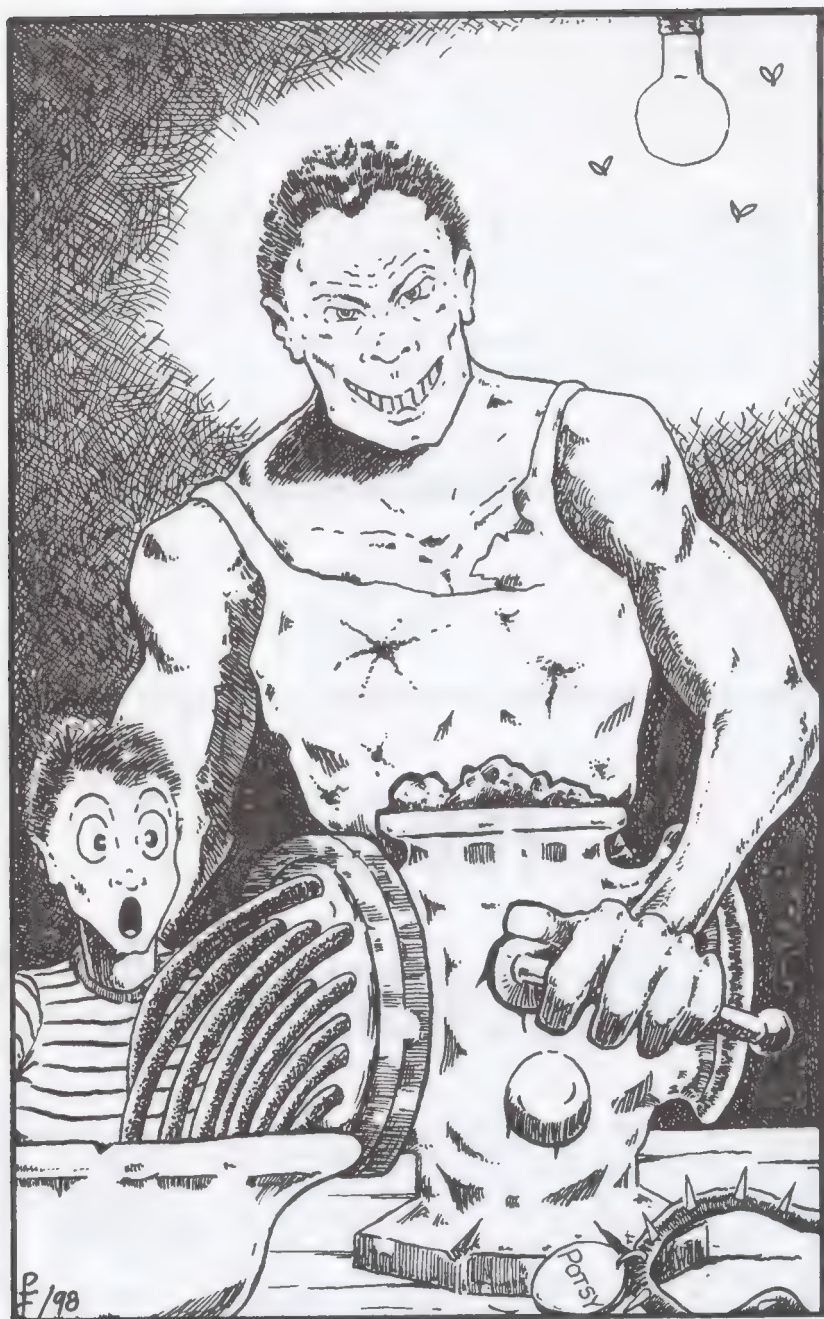
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# Flatworms

Carol Thomas

*illustrated by Peter Francis*

*I don't wanna talk about it no more, lady. I wanna go home. I don't care if you never heard it, I told three other guys. Ask one of them.*

Oh, all right. You're the cop.

It all started when we thought the trailer was haunted. The door kept opening by itself and stuff jumped off the shelves sometimes. We kept watching everything, trying to figure out what was going on, and we finally figured out the dog was telekinetic. My dad got that word off a TV show. It means moving stuff with your mind. That's what the TV guy said.

Anyway, Potsy, that's the dog, he was opening the door when he wanted to go out and he wasn't touching it. He just looked at it and it opened. It was real cool when we first figured it out. We'd say, "Hey, wanna go out, boy? Wanna go for a walk?" and he'd run over to the back door and stare at it and wham! it would slam open. I musta made fifteen bucks off the kids in the other trailers, betting he could do it. And one time he turned on the little gas heater in the kitchen. I guess he got cold. And he'd pull food off the counter sometimes when we forgot to feed him. Potsy was great.

Nah, we don't got him no more. I kinda miss him. He was just an old dog but he was real friendly. But it was my dad's idea and you don't cross my dad.

Eating him was my dad's idea. Potsy, I mean. My dad reads all these newspapers he gets from the variety store and he read this article about these little things called flatworms. They had another name too, planaria or something.

Yeah, planaria, something like that. Anyway, my dad said there were these old experiments where they taught them to do stuff then mushed 'em up and

fed them to other flatworms and the other ones did the stuff and nobody had showed them how. It was cool.

Anyway, my dad said being telekinetic was no good for a dog but it would sure be good for us, 'cause then we could do stuff with our minds and maybe we'd get to go on TV and make a lot of money. But it meant we had to mush Potsy up and eat him. Me and the little kids weren't so crazy about that idea, but like I said, you don't cross my dad. He did it himself with his ax and my mom cooked him up into this mushy meat stuff. And my dad said everybody had to have some.

Well, there was my dad and my mom. Joey, he's my oldest brother, he was in the can for a B an' E then, and Lissy, my big sister, was having another kid and had just married the guy and split. That left me and Chuckie, he's six, and Melly, she's four, and the baby. He musta been just a couple months old. Chuckie and Melly were bawling their eyes out and I wanted to bawl too, 'cause I liked Potsy, but my dad had his mean look, so no way. So we all had some of the mushy stuff and my mom gave some to the baby. I felt like puking after, but I knew if my dad caught me, he'd whale on me, so I just tried not to think about it.

•

Nothing happened for a while. My dad kept testing us, asking us to open doors with our minds and stuff and you could tell he was getting real pissed 'cause none of us could do it, so maybe he'd mushed Potsy for nothing. I heard him whacking on my mom one night, so I guess she couldn't do it either.

But a couple of months after we ate Potsy, I was feeding the baby 'cause Mom was doing something. The kid didn't like the food and he kept pushing at the spoon and crying. Then suddenly the spoon went flying out of my hand and hit the wall and the baby laughed. My mom saw it and her eyes got really big and she told me not to say anything to my dad 'cause he'd probably want to sell the kid to a circus or something. So I kept my mouth shut, and so did she, but the kid blew it. A week or so later, the dumb baby did the same trick when my dad was watching and that was that.

Well, it was the same as Potsy. My dad said being telekinetic was no good for a baby and he wasn't gonna wait until the kid was old enough to do stuff right, so we had to try again. So he did it himself like before and my mom was real upset but she—

Lady? Are you okay? Lady, you don't look so good. 🍁

*ABOUT THE AUTHOR:* CAROL THOMAS is a full-time medical writer and part-time fiction writer. She currently lives in Toronto with her spouse (who is human) and three children (who are not).

*ABOUT THE ARTIST:* PETER FRANCIS lives in Halifax, Nova Scotia, with wife Luisa and an insane cat. He has been exhibiting his work at conventions for over ten years and has contributed to several magazines.

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# Always Been the Special One

Leah Silverman

*illustrated by Mark Savona*

*“Hey, Rajah, you cold or something?”*

Ryan was shivering, even through the heavy jacket and the ball cap he was wearing, but he shoved his hands deeper into his pockets and shook his head anyway.

*“Scared?”*

Sure he was. Scared out of his mind. Scared ready to jump out of his skin. But he didn’t say that. He just shook his head again, clenched his teeth tighter in a jaw that felt like it was already cracking, and kept walking. Head down, like an overworked horse, hissing steam out between his teeth into the freezing night. He had long since lost the right to complain about anything, he figured. Killers shouldn’t have the right to complain.

Beside him, Ravinder was fumbling in her bag. They were going down the avenue that ran in front of the hospital, and her skin was just dark enough that her fingers were almost invisible when they weren’t directly under the streetlights. Ryan thought that was the coolest thing, how her hands could do that. He really wanted to tell her, but he couldn’t now, not with David in the hospital. He would probably never tell her.

She finally found what she was looking for and pulled out a red cigarette pack, letting the bag drop and swing at her side. She took out a cigarette and put it in her mouth, offering the pack to Jason like Ryan wasn’t even there. Jason just shook his head so she dropped the pack back into her bag and started looking for a lighter. Ryan looked at her, concentrated for a second on the white tip of the cigarette, and set it on fire.

Ravinder gasped, jumped back a step. The cigarette tumbled out of her mouth onto the pavement, spitting sparks.

"You *bastard!*" She spat at him, and ground the cigarette like it would attack her otherwise.

"Sorry," Ryan mumbled.

"Son of a bitch," Jason muttered, shaking his head while they waited for Ravinder to catch up. "You just don't learn, do you? Always gotta be the special one."

"I'm sorry," Ryan said again.

"How many times you gonna say that?"

"I don't know." Ryan glanced at Ravinder again and saw that she was crying; her cheeks shone wet in the lamplight but she made no sound at all. He looked away before she noticed his eyes on her. He felt completely trapped like this, between them: a prisoner being led down death row. Dead man walking. He looked over at Jason, how straight and proud he walked, like he was on a mission, and for a second he wanted to hurt him, like maybe if he concentrated hard enough on a section of his head—that spot where his hair fell just behind his ear—he could blast his skull right into his brain, make the bone like a bullet. He wanted to do it so bad, he had to wrench his eyes away and stare at the pavement until he was sure he wasn't really going to do anything. The thought terrified him, that Jason's death could be something he would want. It was like since David he was capable of anything.

He kept his head down as Jason crossed behind him to walk beside Ravinder. Ryan felt Jason's elbow like a knife in his spine as the older boy passed him, and figured Jason meant to do that, though he wasn't sure. That was the kind of thing

David would do, not Jason, but it was almost like Ryan didn't really care, though. Not anymore. Jason put his arms around Ravinder's shoulders and they all stopped for a while so she could just stand and cry with her forehead on his shoulder, making almost no sound at all. Jason was saying "It's okay, it's going to be all right"; words that would've sounded stupid and fake if anyone else said them, but from Jason sounded just right, like the only things you could say. Ryan just stood there, trying not to watch them or to shiver too hard. He wanted to tell her he was sorry again, repeat it over and over until they could forgive him, or look at him like they used to: when he was just David's little brother and the special one, and not hated.

"We should go," Ravinder said after a while. Ryan could see the hospital now, and in a few minutes they would be inside, and maybe after that everything would be all right. He focused on this, trying to believe it, but it was like the words just slipped down inside him and disappeared. All he felt was afraid.

"This'd better work, Rajah," Jason said. Ryan didn't answer him.

Partly he was staying quiet because he was thinking about the raccoon, how it was because of the raccoon that they were going to the hospital like this. Ryan had never told anyone that story, but David had been there and David told everyone, over and over again until they all believed it like David did, like it was true that Ryan had just stretched his arm out and placed his palm like a god over

the raccoon's bloody skull and saved it from dying. David owned that story, and he had told it that last night he lived the same way he always did: with one arm thrown tight around his little brother's shoulders and smiling down at him and at everyone, like it was him and not Ryan who was the special one. And Ryan always felt like that, like he was nothing next to that smile and that strength and that voice with no shame or fear in it. Like somehow, even though David was talking about him, he was really saying *this is mine, this is mine*. Ryan never knew how David did that, but he did.

Ryan always knew things like that though, things that other people never noticed or couldn't figure out or were only barely aware of. Like he knew what it meant when their friend Mark looked at Jason the way he did—with so much pain in his eyes it made Ryan think of the raccoon—or that one night when he had brushed by David in the hallway and knew instantly, *instantly*, what their father had done. Or how Ravinder, maybe once or twice, actually meant it when she smiled at him.

Or how he knew he was a murderer even though no one else did. David had never stopped breathing, was still breathing now, but Ryan had been there, had touched David's bleeding flesh as it cooled on the pavement, and he knew David was gone.

The hospital was so warm inside that the tips of Ryan's fingers started to burn. He had to blow on his hands and squeeze them open and

shut several times before they felt normal again. Jason went right on past him up to the long desk marked ADMITTING, to ask if it was okay to visit someone in the continuing care ward. Ravinder went with him and stood there with her hands tight on the counter. She kept looking back at Ryan as if to make sure he was still there. He just stayed where he was, rubbing his hands together until a nurse came by pushing a woman in a wheelchair and told him to get out of the way.

Jason nodded once to the nurse behind the desk, then gently touched Ravinder's shoulder so that she turned around and followed him. She looked really bad, Ryan thought; pale, almost grey, like she didn't have enough blood anymore, and her eyes were so criss-crossed with red Ryan could see it even from where he was standing. Ravinder was mostly looking right through him, but Jason's eyes burned like acid as he glared at him and tilted his head once toward the elevators. Ryan followed after them, feeling almost like he shouldn't be breathing in the wake of that horrible silence, meek as a beaten dog.

"This'd better work," Jason said again. He leaned against the mirrored wall of the elevator, hands in the pockets of his jacket, but his eyes wouldn't leave Ryan's face. Ravinder stood beside him, so close their arms were pressed together, like she had no strength of her own and needed Jason just to stand.

Ryan said nothing—there was no way he could answer him. Instead he stared at the space beside Ravinder's shoulder, where he could

see his own face looking back at him: worn ball cap shadowing eyes that he knew would look as hollow and empty as David's did when the paramedic lifted the lids to shine his light into them. "Always the special one," he breathed to himself, amazed at how that white, acne-scarred, terrifyingly uninteresting face could belong to anyone they called special. How that could even be him looking back from the mirror, when it was really like he barely existed at all. David's face had been so different, it was amazing they could be brothers. David looked much more like Jason, really, sharp-edged and handsome. They even walked the same.

Ryan felt something like a hot surge in the right side of his head, but it was already too late to do anything but watch the vicious crack appear in the mirror and run straight through his reflection, cutting the stupid horrified expression in half and snaking up behind Ravinder's shoulder and over Jason's head before stopping at the joining wall. Ryan pressed himself back against the wall, shame sucking the air out of his lungs. He saw Jason's shock turn to fury as he watched the glass split in front of him. Ravinder let out a small cry and buried her face in Jason's shoulder, as if Ryan would disappear if she didn't look at him. Ryan turned away from them, hugging himself to try to stop his shaking.

He had lost control like that only one time before, when he was six years old. He had been standing beside David at the bathroom sink, brushing his teeth and thinking

about nothing that he remembered later. Suddenly there was a feeling like a small, warm twitch in his head and then he was watching the mirror turn into a maze of tiny fissures like someone had hit it with a hammer. They both stopped dead, spit dribbling down their chins as the cracks spread, until the whole mirror had become a mosaic of broken glass.

David backed up a step. "What did you *do*?" he whispered. He touched a crack line with a fingertip, then winced when it came away bleeding. He examined the cut with wonder. "That's bad luck," he said finally, really quiet, like he had meant to say something else. Ryan had never forgotten that—the one time when he had done something that not even David could understand.

"I'm gonna tell Dad," David said. His finger was still bleeding. "He's gonna think I did it—I'm gonna tell him."

Ryan's toothbrush clattered into the sink, forgotten. He had to spit before he could speak. "No, David! No! It was an accident! I didn't mean it, please!" He whirled around to face the door, wet hands clenched, but David had already gone. He grabbed the bottom of his pajama top in both hands, wringing the cloth in his small fists. "No, please, David," he said. Their father would be there in seconds. He turned back to the mirror, though his eyes were so blurred with tears he could barely make out his features in the spider-web lines. "It was an accident! Please go back, please go back!" The mirror didn't change, but the



toothpaste had started stinging his face and he could hear footsteps in the hallway now, and soon he would feel their father's hand like lightning on his back.

The elevator *pinged* at them that it was their floor, and Ryan was the first out and down the hallway. The memory, his brother, this place clawed like an animal in his mind and he couldn't stop shuddering. His heart felt like ice. *Dead man walking*. His footsteps, Jason and Ravinder's footsteps behind him, felt like the last sounds in the world.

A nurse's aid passed them, pretty and kind-looking and very professional as she smiled. Ryan didn't smile back. He imagined her face cracking across like the mirror had if he looked at her, split in two with a bright seam of blood.

"Show her what you can do, Rajah. C'mon, she wants to see it."

It was New Year's Eve, the night David died, and Ryan was sitting on the worn, beer-stained carpet in David's apartment, a little drunk already and trying to make out the features of Jason's latest girlfriend. This one—he never did get her name—was very exotic-looking, with eyes so almond-shaped they were like triangles, and dead-straight black hair that fell to her waist.

"Don't call me Rajah," Ryan said. Jason just laughed at him.

"What does he do?" the girlfriend asked. She had a high-pitched voice that sounded almost like a whistle when she raised it to be heard above the pounding music. She seemed relaxed, even among all these total strangers, though she clung to

Jason's arm with both hands like it was a piece of wood and she was drowning. He felt the hard poke of a kick in his back, and threw his head around to see David standing there with a beer in his hand.

"Don't be a jerk, Rajah, show'er something." His brother's voice was slurred already, and had gone flat and hard. There would be no rescue there, Ryan knew, and his heart sank. He looked to his left, where Mark and two other guys he didn't know were slumped on the couch. Mark smiled at him and raised his beer in toast, though there was no way he could have heard Jason or David, sitting that close to the speakers. There was a small clutch of empty bottles on the floor by his foot, and Ryan knew that by now Mark would be almost too drunk to stand. Ryan sighed, closed his eyes, and concentrated on one of the empty bottles. He felt it when it tipped on its side, then he concentrated again and pulled it toward him. He opened his eyes and watched it roll along the carpet until it bumped into his thigh. It was hard doing tricks like that, though he knew it would impress the girlfriend, and when he relaxed he could feel sweat running over his lips and down his temples. He looked up at her, smiling wanly into her shocked face. Behind him, David started clapping.

"Wow!" the girlfriend said, almost squealing. But he saw her grip Jason's arm tighter. He never took his eyes off her, even when her smile tilted and faded. Part of him wondered why Jason wasn't getting on his case for scaring her, but the rest

of him was too drunk to care.

"Well!" the girlfriend said suddenly, "I feel like a beer. Does anyone else want a beer?"

"Got mine," David said, still behind Ryan.

"Sure," said Jason.

"I'd love a beer," Ryan said. The alcohol inside him was warm enough to make him feel scrappy, belligerent. He decided it was a good feeling.

She started when he spoke to her, then her smile flickered before it died again. "Sure," she said too brightly, her voice an annoying squeak, "three beers. Be right back." She detached herself from Jason's arm and fled. Ryan smiled to himself, figuring he wouldn't see her after that; wondering how long it would be now before she demanded that Jason take her home and how long she would have to wait before he did.

The beer bottle still had some liquid in it, and it was getting his jeans wet, so he shoved the bottle away from him with his hand. He watched it rolling, just drunk enough to be fascinated by it, until it hit Mark's foot and stopped. Mark didn't notice it. Ryan wasn't even sure he was still awake.

David pressed his foot into his back again before he left. "You're in the way," he said. Ryan watched him go toward the couch, then sighed and pulled himself to his feet. He stumbled a bit, drunker than he'd realized. He didn't care, though. For once he just didn't care.

Mark wasn't asleep—he and David were laughing about something.

"Gonna teach us a drinking game," David said when Ryan was close enough to hear. He indicated one of the guys beside Mark with his thumb. "Go turn off the music."

Ryan shrugged and stared at the stereo, but he was too drunk to concentrate on moving one little button, so he finally had to walk over and shut it off by hand. The sudden silence almost hurt his ears more than the noise had.

"Brian here's got a game to show us," David said, and because it was David, everyone listened to him.

It had never happened with the raccoon the way David said it did, but only Ryan knew that.

Their dad had bought them pellet guns when Ryan was just fourteen. He and David had gone down into the ravine behind their house to play with them, slipping down the path through the forest, occasionally grabbing onto trees so they wouldn't fall and roll all the way down. It was spring and it had been raining for days.

It was misty and almost twilight when they saw the raccoon, dark enough that its yellow eyes were already shining as it climbed down the tree toward them. They had been firing the pellets into tree trunks, and the first thing David did when they saw the animal's face was to tilt his muzzle up and shoot at it like that was the most natural thing in the world. He missed the first time, and Ryan was just mouthing "don't" when he fired again. This time he hit it. The raccoon slipped from the tree without a sound and fell like a rock, straight down into the underbrush.

It landed right at David's feet like a trophy—he had to step back so the small body wouldn't hit him—and lay there in a small black heap. Ryan and David both bent over so they could see it better, but neither of them touched it, as if it were more dangerous dead than it had been alive.

"I think it's dead," David said softly, as if he'd had nothing to do with it. Ryan didn't say anything. He could hear the water dripping from the trees.

David had shot it right through the head, it looked like, since Ryan could just make out the blood running from the raccoon's nose and eyes. There were water droplets on its fur, making it look almost silver in the last bit of daylight.

"It's beautiful," Ryan said. He suddenly felt like crying and swallowed hard so he wouldn't.

"What are you talking about?" David asked. He looked like he was going to nudge it with his foot but he didn't.

"Nothing," Ryan said, "just its fur. It's nice."

"Oh," David said. Then neither of them said anything.

Then the raccoon twitched. Its head jerked in a kind of spasm and both boys jumped back. David slipped on the wet leaves and almost fell. Ryan yelped in surprise but, for once, David didn't laugh at him.

"Oh my God," David said, so quietly Ryan could barely hear him. The raccoon was still moving. It kept trying to lift up its head but could only rub it back and forth along the ground. In his mind, Ryan was begging David to lift his gun back up

and shoot it again, kill it for real this time so they wouldn't have to watch this, but David didn't do anything. He was holding the small rifle with both hands and kept tightening and relaxing his fists around the barrel.

"Kill it, David," Ryan finally whispered, amazed to hear his own voice, "please. You've got to kill it."

David backed up a step. "I..." His mouth opened and closed again, then his eyes got wide and he started talking, really fast. "No. You fix it, Ryan." He saw the astonishment on his brother's face but kept going. "You can make it better, can't you? You can, right?" He was suddenly pleading, his voice tight, and it occurred to Ryan that his brother might be fighting tears like he was. "Please, Ryan! I know you can fix him. Please make him all right."

Ryan looked at David, then down at the raccoon. It was still moving, more slowly now. He looked back at David, then nodded.

"Okay."

He didn't know what to do next but he figured he should touch where the raccoon had been wounded. So he knelt on the ground, putting his gun beside him. The earth was wet enough that right away he could feel the cold and the water seeping into his jeans. He didn't really want to touch the raccoon because it looked so bad, but he took a deep breath and put his hand on its head anyway. He could feel the blood, still warm, seeping from its nose. There was a small hole above its eye. He could feel it now with his palm, but it was too dark to see it. Its fur was cold and there were leaves and mud sticking to it.

It seemed forever that he stayed like that, his arm outstretched and stiff until it started aching, not knowing what to do but trying to will the raccoon to be well again. Then, just like that, it jumped under his hand: a sudden horrible spasm like it'd been electrocuted, smearing blood over his palm and down his wrist.

Instantly Ryan fell back in terror, scrambling away. It seemed like years before he could get up, and when he did, his feet kept slipping back on the wet leaves, like running in a nightmare. He took off into the forest, just wanting to get away from the awfulness of the raccoon's dying. But he missed the path in the darkness and couldn't find places for his feet on the hillside, so that when David caught up to him he was still scrambling on his hands and knees, trying to find hand-holds among the tree branches. David grabbed him hard, almost tackling him, and they both slipped and fell to the sodden ground.

"Let go of me!" Ryan screamed and hit at his brother, but David was older and stronger, and just kept ducking his head back until he could wrap his large hands around Ryan's wrists and hold them down until he stopped fighting.

"What happened?" David asked, still gasping. "Why'd you run?"

Ryan didn't know why he ran. "Get off of me," he said, and David actually did, letting go of him, then standing. "The raccoon jumped."

"What do you mean, it jumped?"

"It did," Ryan said. Somehow, it still felt like he was touching the raccoon and he couldn't get rid of it, no matter how many times he wiped his

palm against his jeans.

"Did you save it? Why'd you run?"

"I think it died," Ryan said, suddenly sure of it. "I don't know... It just jumped up all of a sudden. It was creepy." It was worse than that, way worse, but Ryan had no idea how to put it into words that David could understand. He wiped his hand down his jeans again. It was beginning to feel raw.

"I want to go home," he said.

"We can't. We have to find our guns."

They looked around for almost an hour, until it was so dark, not even David's flashlight could do much. It had started raining again.

"Dad's going to kill us," David said. Ryan nodded, though he knew David couldn't see him. He kept stumbling because he didn't know where he was going, and he wanted to grab on to David's arm but he didn't dare. He kept thinking about the raccoon, the sticky warmth of its blood against his skin, smelling of metal, how its eyes had shone before David had shot it.

David cried out as he hit his foot against something and nearly fell. "Christ! Why the hell did you have to run away like that? We're gonna get in such hell because of you."

"I'm sorry," Ryan said. He still wasn't sure why he took off. It seemed so stupid.

They couldn't find their guns, even with the flashlight. But the next day when they went back, the raccoon was gone.

"Where'd it go?" David asked, looking at the place where the raccoon had been. The leaves had been



pushed aside from when the raccoon moved its head back and forth.

"I don't know," Ryan said. He didn't want to be there; he kept thinking about the blood smearing along his hand. "Maybe some animal took it."

David just shook his head. "You saved it. You must've. That's why it's not here."

Ryan looked at his brother, shaking his head. "No, David."

David just stared back at him for a long moment, then hefted his rifle by the barrel and started walking back toward the path. "I say you saved it, Rajah," he shot back over his shoulder, "and if you say you didn't, you're a liar."

So David kept the story like that: how they found the wounded raccoon and how David told Ryan to save it and how Ryan did. David never mentioned their guns, though, because he knew Ravinder wouldn't like to hear it.

There weren't many coma patients on the continuing care ward, only four of them, and they were all kept together in one large room. There was a wall of glass separating them from the corridor, with a wire grid threaded through it as if the hospital was expecting a riot. All four of them were so still that through the glass from the outside they looked like mannequins, like nothing even approaching life. Only the steady flashing from the monitors seemed real.

David was in the farthest bed on the left, next to a woman whose feet were carefully laced into brand new sneakers. Ryan's gaze just passed right over her, not even curious.

Jason and Ravinder had passed him in the hallway, and now Jason was already standing beside David's head.

"C'mon, Rajah," he said, "we're waiting."

Ryan nodded, though he was so scared he was almost paralyzed. It was an effort to walk, to stand on David's other side where the chair was, where Ravinder was sitting already and holding her boyfriend's hand.

She'd started crying again, but when she looked up at Ryan she was begging instead of terrified. "Please save him," she said.

Ryan swallowed, nodded again. Ravinder got up immediately and he slid into the chair, taking her place.

David's face was still swollen with bruises, dark purple down one side of his face, and there was a bandage wrapped around his head because they had had to operate to keep the bleeding from destroying his brain. Most of the bones on his left side had been broken too, though he was supposed to be too deeply unconscious to feel any pain.

Ryan slid his hand around David's, hating how cold David's skin was, how it already felt dead. He hadn't touched his brother in years. He could feel Jason and Ravinder watching him, waiting for what David had told them he could do. Ryan wanted to run, to stop breathing if he could. He didn't know what to do at all. All he could think of was the raccoon.

The guy, Brian, had learned this drinking game in Cuba. The way it worked was that you put a bottle of

rum somewhere in a far part of the room, then the most wasted people would take turns being spun around and then try to get to it. Whoever actually got that far had to drink it all.

Brian held the bottle in his hands for a while, considering, then put it out on the balcony, leaving the doors wide open. A few people started to complain about how cold it was going to get, but no one really paid attention.

Mark went first, but took two steps after being spun around and collapsed, lying on his back and giggling that the ceiling wouldn't stop. Then it was David's turn. Brian spun David around and everyone else laughed and backed away to give him plenty of room. David walked into a few people by mistake, but he wasn't half as drunk as Mark, and made it to the rum all right. Then everyone started chanting "Go, David! Go, David!" while he drank it almost without taking a breath. When he finished it, he held the bottle above his head like a spear, staggering backward and grinning. He tossed it over the railing, then leaned over to watch it fall, one hand on the wall beside him. Ryan had come up close to watch, and he thought he could hear it crash four stories below; a brittle sound like ice.

Jason had come onto the balcony now too, and was clapping and whistling, with Ravinder laughing behind him. David was still looking over the balcony edge, as if the bottle had never stopped falling.

"What you lookin' at, Dave?" Jason called to him. "You hit somebody?"

David just turned to look at him,

smiling. Then, with one smooth motion, he leapt onto the balcony ledge, using the wall for balance. He pulled himself upright and threw out his arms like a tightrope walker, windmilling a bit.

"Jesus Christ, David!" Jason called to him, completely serious now. "What the hell are you doing? You wanna die?"

"Nope," David said, still smiling, but he didn't come down. He took two steps, toward the other end of the railing.

"David, come down, please," Ravinder said. She had her hands jammed right up under her chin, and she sounded like she was ready to burst into tears. "This isn't funny, David."

David shifted balance a little. "Relax," he said, "I'll come down in a sec."

He had almost reached the other wall now, and Ryan could imagine how, in a few seconds, David would jump easily to the balcony and grin over Ravinder's head as she hugged him. Everyone would start breathing again and would probably shout and clap for him and he would own that, too: how scared they all were, how relieved they would be when he was all right.

So Ryan moved his concentration down to his brother's feet and pushed him, just a little, right at his heels. He wanted him to have to fight for his balance for a second, to be afraid, to embarrass him.

"Ryan...!" David bent sideways, arms circling wildly. Ryan smiled, waiting for his brother to get his balance back, to pitch toward them and fall, humiliated but safe, onto the

balcony.

But David was drunk, and he never did get his balance back. His eyes were huge and white with terror, and looking right at Ryan when he fell. Jason was closest, and screamed as he lunged for him, but he had been drinking too, and couldn't move fast enough. He didn't even touch him.

There was an enormous silence after that.

Then someone said "Oh my God!" and broke it. And everyone but Ryan ran to the railing at once, looking over at the body down below.

"Call 911!" Jason yelled to everyone as he ran past, heading toward the building's stairwell. A small group followed him, as if movement alone could fix anything. Behind him, Ryan could hear someone already on the phone. Whoever it was started to cry as they spoke. For long seconds, Ravinder just stood there, her fingers almost in her mouth. Then her huge eyes hit Ryan's and locked on them; huge and black and terrified and knowing exactly what had happened. Then it was like something inside her snapped back into place and she turned and ran after Jason.

Ryan stumbled backward and sat heavily on the floor, mouth gaping. He would have to go and find what was left of his brother, he knew that, but right now he couldn't move, couldn't make his mind work, couldn't even imagine what he'd just done. It was like he'd turned to concrete inside, like he wasn't even human anymore. In the distance he could already hear the sirens, and

their droning wail screamed for him, because he couldn't make a sound.

He closed his eyes and tried to focus, imagining David's hand tightening around his, his eyes opening, his voice... But it was like Ryan's whole universe had become the cold black silence that was all David had now, a gaping pit going down and down and down.

Ryan opened his eyes, gasping. "I can't do it," he said. He hadn't let go of his brother's hand and he could feel the death in it, waiting there like a predator for David's heart to stop.

"You will," Jason spat.

Ryan shook his head, let go of David, and pushed back away from him.

"I can't save him," he said. "I never saved anything."

"Liar!" Ravinder hissed at him, "you want him to die!"

"No," Ryan said. He couldn't make himself look at their faces, so he stared at the darkened skin of his brother, at the complete stillness there. "But I can't do anything. If I try to, he'll die for real, just like the raccoon did."

"You saved the raccoon!" Ravinder almost shouted. Jason had to quiet her. He put his arm around her but she pulled away from him.

"You're talking bullshit, Rajah. We know that story."

Ryan finally looked up at them. "It didn't happen that way," he said. "The raccoon died. I felt it."

Jason opened his mouth to speak, then closed it again. "That doesn't make any sense," he said finally.

"I felt it die," Ryan repeated, "but David didn't want it like that. I guess

that's why he told you I saved it. But it didn't work. I tried."

"I don't understand," Ravinder said. "You're the special one. You have to be able to help him. I don't understand."

"I can't," Ryan said, "I'm sorry."

Ravinder let out a sudden sob, holding her hands to her mouth as if to shove back a scream. Jason tried to keep holding her, but it was like all the power he had suddenly drained out of him. His arm dropped and he sagged back against the wall. He started wiping at his eyes with

the back of his hand. Like David did, trying not to cry over a raccoon. Ryan kept waiting for him to say something.

But he didn't, and eventually there was no point in waiting anymore. They didn't watch him leave, either, and Ryan didn't look back at them. But he did glance at his brother, once.

David hadn't moved, would never move again, but he was still breathing.

He would probably be breathing for a long time. 🍁

*ABOUT THE AUTHOR:* LEAH SILVERMAN is enjoying her third year free of the University of Toronto, and is slowly getting over the trauma. She now has her own digs, a job, and two cats. Just like real folks.

*ABOUT THE ARTIST:* MARK SAVONA is presently in full-time attendance at the Ontario College of Art and Design. A Torontonion by birth, this urban man of mystery exists under the assumed identity of a third-year illustration student, whilst contemplating world conquest. He's looking for more work as an artist so he can give up one or both of his Mcjobs. *On Spec* will gladly forward inquiries from interested potential employers.

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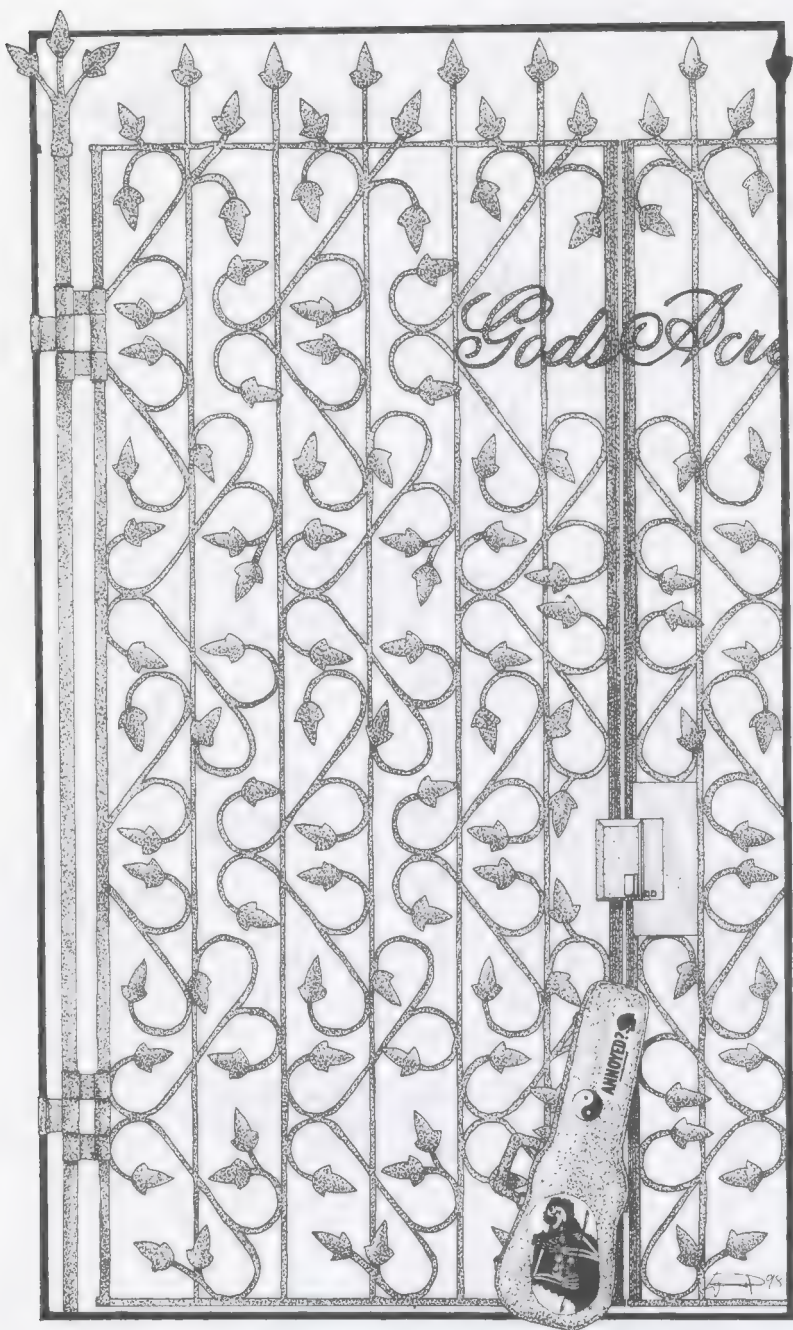


# On the edge

Lynne Taylor Fahnestalk



"SHE KISSED ME, ALL RIGHT,  
BUT THE PRE-NUPTIAL AGREEMENT  
TURNED ME OFF."



# A Valediction

Leslie Brown

*Illustrated by Warren Layberry*

*The skinny adolescent girl scuttled up to the wrought-iron gates and, glancing frequently over her shoulder, fumbled in her torn knapsack for the card. She closed her grubby fingers over it and ran it through the mechanism. The gates opened noiselessly and she slid through. She flitted between the crypts until she reached a large mausoleum. The door was unlocked: the people who guarded the Godsacre considered the electric fence and tall gate enough of a deterrent. She shut the door behind her and placed her knapsack and violin case in a corner where she wouldn't kick them by accident. She felt for the candle and matches on the floor. Lighting the candle, she called through the gloom:*

"Hi guys, I'm home." She trotted around the perimeter of the room pushing buttons. Behind her, screens flickered to life and heads formed through the initial static.

"What, what, what?" Mrs. Davney was always confused upon waking.

"Shut up, you old bag," Mr. Ellis bellowed at her from across the room. "Gracie's home."

"Gracie? Gracie, is that you, love?" Mrs. Davney's eyes could move back and forth even if her head couldn't turn.

"It's me, Mrs. Davney, I'm home," Gracie called absentmindedly. She was busily trying to open a can of pork and beans with the bent can opener on her Swiss army knife. She worked her way as far as she could along the rim before she lost patience and pried the lid back with her fingers. She used the knife to

scoop out the beans into her mouth, taking care not to cut her tongue on the sharp edge.

"Don't gulp your food, dear." Mrs. Perryman looked down from the second level of screens disapprovingly.

"Don't scold her, Mavis. Tell us about your day, Gracie dear," ordered Mr. Ellis.

"Well," replied Gracie, her voice muffled by the beans.

"Don't talk with your mouth full, dear." Mrs. Perryman was still scowling.

"Shut up!" Five heads screamed at her.

"Well!" Mrs. Perryman huffed. "Gracie wouldn't have turned me on if she didn't want help with her deportment."

"That's right, Mrs. Perryman. I'm sorry," Gracie said clearly, having finished off the can. "It's hard to have good manners when you're about starving to death."

"That's 'almost' starving, dear, use good grammar and you'll go far." Mrs. Perryman considered herself ascendant over the other talking heads, since Gracie had asked her to teach her social manners. The only other head who ranked up there with Mrs. Perryman was Mr. Shaeffer, who was trying to teach Gracie about investing. He was about five years out of date with the stock market but his theories were sound. By following his advice, Gracie had doubled the five hundred dollars she had stolen from the parked car. Mr. Shaeffer didn't know that she also consulted with Mr. Peterson five mausoleums over about betting on the horse races. Gracie knew Mr. Peterson had won and lost several fortunes at the track, so she took his

advice with a grain of salt.

"Go on, girl, tell us what happened today!" Mr. Ellis was impatient.

"Okay, okay. I went to the Dolecenter today to get some food stamps. Elizabeth was giving them out." The heads all groaned. Elizabeth wanted their Gracie to live in a Co-op housing for street kids. They were afraid that one day she would be persuaded to leave them. Gracie quickly continued: "No, no, it's okay, she stayed off my case 'cause of the knife fight."

"Oh my good—" Mrs. Davney flickered out. Gracie leapt up to push her button, and Mrs. Perryman's for good measure, because they were both on short timers.

"What, what, what?" said Mrs. Davney.

"Shut up, ya old bag," bellowed Mr. Ellis.

"Don't you want to hear about the fight?" shouted Gracie over the din. They hushed each other and turned their attention back to their Gracie.

"Slash and Sister Serina went at it right in the food stamp line. Slash called Sister a slut for doing it with Slash's boysie, Zinger."

"Language, Grace," expostulated Mrs. Perryman.

"Sorry, Mrs. Perryman. Anyway, Sister Serina pulled out a blade about as long as her arm and let Slash have it. There was blood all over. The secretary was having a hissy fit but Elizabeth just pushed Sister Serina out the door and clamped a towel around Slash's neck until the med squad got there. Memsey grabbed a handful of stamps and gave me ten outside 'cause I had found those shoes for her. That's how I got the can of beans I had



for dinner."

The heads all exclaimed loudly in amazement, so loudly that Gracie couldn't hear Mr. Shaeffer calling her. It wasn't until Mrs. Davney's timer ran out that she was able to hear Mr. Shaeffer's voice. She left Mrs. Davney off even though the heads didn't like to miss anything that the others might hear. She went over to him and crouched near his screen. Mr. Shaeffer turned his volume down so Mrs. Perryman right above him couldn't hear.

"That does it, Gracie. It's time." Poor Mr. Shaeffer's image had developed a distracting flicker. Gracie felt bad because she knew she had been pushing his button far too often. It wasn't just the fact that he was teaching her how to make money; he also reminded her of her grandpa in the time before the streets.

"Gracie, I know you don't want to leave here, but it's time you got yourself a life, girl. How long have I been dead?"

"Five years, Mr. Shaeffer," Gracie answered.

"Okay, my lawyer will still be alive and probably at the same address." Mr. Shaeffer was flickering badly.

"Okay, okay, Mr. Shaeffer." Gracie knew the plan; she wanted to keep Mr. Shaeffer's chip from deteriorating any further. "I go to your lawyer, Mr. Higgins, at 550 Beltnore Avenue on the twentieth floor. I tell him that I have the number of your Bahamas bank account and I will split the contents with him if he helps me get it. You're sure he'll go for it?"

"Of course I'm sure, Gracie! He was a slimy bastard when I was alive and I'm sure time has not improved

him. Just you remember to tell him about those things I've told you. Tell him you have it written down and if anything happens to you, it all gets mailed to the tabloids."

"Okay, Mr. Shaeffer, I've got it. I'll come back and let you know if it works."

"No, Gracie. You can't ever come back here. Take that entry card you found and cut it up into little pieces. Don't let that slime Higgins find out that you're getting your inside information from a talking head or I get smashed and you end up dead in the harbor. I know you've got the brains and the guts to do this, kid. Don't let me down."

Gracie could have sworn his eyes looked watery. She looked away stubbornly. The rest of the heads were quiet, straining their auditory pickups. Mrs. Perryman flicked out.

"I don't want to leave you guys. I picked this mausoleum out as the best. I chose this family and I don't want to lose it like the other one." Her lower lip jutted out stubbornly, an expression with which Elizabeth at the Dolecenter was quite familiar.

"Fer Christ sakes, girl!" Mr. Shaeffer bellowed. He saw all the heads that were still on were listening, and lowered his output. "We're just chips with personality and memory imprints. We don't even kid ourselves by thinking we're alive! What happens when we wear out? You pick out a newer family? And listen to the same old stuff over and over? Aren't you tired of hearing about Mrs. Davney's grandchildren? And Mr. Ellis' lumbago, which he can't even feel anymore, fer Gawd's sakes? And me, an old childless man who couldn't take time out

from his wheelings and dealings to have a family. I've done some bad things in my life and I'm making you do a bad thing, child. But it's the only way to get you off the streets and away from all these dead people. Do it, girl, for yourself."

Mr. Shaeffer flickered out. Gracie didn't push the button again. She sat huddled against the wall, her arms wrapped around her legs. Mr. Ellis was the last screen to flicker out. His family had paid for the deluxe interactive timer. Because Gracie wasn't moving or talking, there was no stimulus to keep him on. She could still see his reproachful face gazing at her even after the screen faded to black.

Gracie sighed and reached for the battered violin case. Opening it, she caught the little velvet purse as it fell out. A few credit chips clicked together inside. There was not a lot of money to be made busking. People weren't impressed anymore if you could play an instrument well. They could go home and plug into a Wilson Kirk disc and feel that they were actually playing the violin with the London Philharmonic, that is, when they didn't feel like being the conductor or the guy who hits the cymbals together. Gracie ignored the looks of incomprehension from the people on the street and played for the sheer joy of it. The heads liked her playing, but they loved everything she did. Elizabeth said she was good and kept applying every year in Gracie's name for the one scholarship offered by the Academy in New New York. Gracie didn't see the point. The scholarship only covered tuition and a personal tutor. You'd still have to find a place

to live in New New York and feed yourself. Gracie doubted whether there were any cemeteries or Godsacres close to the Academy. The kind of money she could get from this lawyer would go a long way, but there were many other considerations.

She played a Bach concerto until she felt better, then carefully put her violin away and hid it. Slipping out of the mausoleum, she made her way further back into the Godsacre, to the older section. She stopped in front of a small crypt. The screen was protected by a stone overhang, but it was otherwise exposed to the elements. She pushed the button.

The screen shimmered and came to life. A young man's face gazed back at her. He had close-cropped hair and a solemn expression. When he recognized Gracie, the serious lips curved in a smile.

"Gracie," was all he said.

"Jacob, Mr. Shaeffer wants me to go to his lawyer today. I'm not ready for this. It's too soon." Gracie bit her lower lip to stop its trembling. "I just won't turn him on again so he can't bug me to leave."

Jacob contemplated her statement. His chip took a long time to process data but Gracie felt that that just made him a better listener.

"Gracie, you are going to be sixteen soon, aren't you?" he finally said.

"Yeah," she answered reluctantly, knowing the direction the conversation was going to take.

"They're going to put you on workforce then, aren't they?" Jacob asked, his brow furrowed with thought.

"They have to catch me first!" she answered defiantly. "I can hide here

forever."

Jacob flickered, and she seized the sides of his vid in alarm. It was too soon for him to be shutting off.

"It's all right, Gracie," he said with a wry smile. "The mechanism is just wearing out. I'll be gone in a few years and you'll have to find a new friend." Gracie shook her head mutely but Jacob persisted.

"It's true, Gracie. We all wear out just like real people do. You can keep finding new vids to keep you company, but they'll never give you a real family. Children of your own, Gracie. I died before I had a family. If you stay here, you'll never give yourself the chance to have what I missed out on."

"I don't want a family and children. I want you, Jacob." Gracie had never had the courage to tell him how she felt, but since everything was changing, why not this too?

Jacob smiled his solemn smile.

"I'm not real, Gracie, I never will be. Go and do what Mr. Shaeffer has told you to do and make me proud of you. It's best that we don't talk anymore. I won't answer you if you turn me on again." His timing was impeccable and he flickered off.

Gracie left him off but spent some time crying against his crypt. This was curiously unsatisfying, since her mind kept insisting on thinking about the best way to blackmail lawyer Higgins. She stood and stretched out kinked knees. She ran her hand gently down the side of the monitor and, as the birds began their predawn chorus, she slipped out between the gates and was gone.

Gracie fixed the receptionist with her best glare as she sat in the upholstered

chair in the lawyer's outer office. It had required some fast talking to prevent the receptionist from having building security toss her out on her ear, but Mr. Shaeffer's coaching seemed to do the trick. Nevertheless, Mr. Higgins was making her wait, to soften her up, no doubt. Gracie rebraided her amulets into her bangs and added some new ones she had picked up from the subway platform. There must have been a girlgang fight there the night before that had involved a lot of preliminary hair-pulling. Choice amulets had been scattered like rice at a wedding in and around the pools of blood. The receptionist opened his mouth to say something about Gracie's grooming but was forestalled by the vibrating of his earcom. He reluctantly pushed the button to open the inner office door and indicated, with a jerk of his head, that Gracie should enter.

Higgins was a slim, well-groomed man in his early forties. There was a cloth spread over his desk and his midday meal was set out with precise neatness. He was selecting pieces of meat from a bowl with chopsticks and chewing them one by one, with an air of deep concentration. Gracie's mouth instantly watered, but she schooled her face to blankness and seated herself opposite her adversary. He dabbed his mouth with a cloth napkin and set his chopsticks down on a holder. He leaned back in his chair and steeped his hands under his closely shaven chin.

"Well, little girl, your offer intrigues me. You told my receptionist that you have a million dollars to give me. So do tell. Where does a little ragged street scag get that kind of money?"

There was a predatory gleam in his eyes that would have made Gracie quail in the days before she faced down Crazy Louis in the alley behind the Dolecenter. Gracie placed her fingertips on the edge of his desk and leaned forward with a confidential air.

"Mr. William Shaeffer has a numbered Bahamas account that was overlooked in the settlement of his estate. In that account is two million dollars, give or take some loose change. Half is for you if you help me get it."

The lawyer raised his eyebrows in mock respect. He drummed his fingers quietly on the desk.

"I assume you have a plan to keep me from swindling you out of your million dollars. Care to lay it all on the table now?"

"Certainly," Gracie said politely. "Six years ago you abducted a four-year-old boy from the Ritchie project. You thought he was a dolekid, so the manhunt came as quite a surprise to you. How could you know that Councilperson Hammond was visiting her sister and had brought her little boy with her? I guess he just slipped out to play with the other kids, except it was too late in the evening and all he found was you."

Lawyer Higgins' face had lost all expression and looked like the marble bust of that famous Prime Minister buried in the best section of the Godsacre. Gracie pushed on.

"You needed help to dispose of the body and that was your big mistake because somebody talked. All the details have been written down and should anything happen to me, those details will be mailed to various

people, including Councilperson Hammond. Give me my money and I promise to disappear. No guarantees that I won't pop up in the future, but by then you will have covered your tracks a bit better and no one will believe me. So that's why you pay me now and take my word with respect to the bank account."

"I don't have that kind of money in a liquid state. You will have to wait a few days."

There was no emotion in the lawyer's voice, but a chill went down Gracie's back. She dug her nails into her palms to make herself focus better. She shook her head firmly.

"You can mortgage your house in Rothwell Heights with one call to your bank and have the money transferred to your account in less than an hour. Then you can put it on my credit chip here." She placed an EasyTransfer chip on the table. A bit of a risk, that, since anyone could use it but it had the advantage of being untraceable to her.

The lawyer sat absolutely still for a minute and then picked up the phone.

Gracie left the office quickly, the chip resting in the velvet purse between her breasts. The account in the Bahamas was real but that would not be enough to mollify lawyer Higgins. She saw the look in his eyes as he ran her chip through the Transfer machine. She trembled briefly, aware that she was out of her depth, but she had faith in Mr. Shaeffer's instructions.

Not enough faith, however, to keep her from heading back to the Godsacre. Gracie needed a safe place to plan before she launched herself on



an unsuspecting world. She took meticulous precautions to prevent being followed. She even ditched her clothes at a Dolecenter and got new ones in case Higgins had planted a sticktight on her. A headshave and a rad pair of UV goggles completed the picture. All that left was the chip but Gracie didn't know of any way someone could tag an EasyTransfer.

She didn't feel like going back to the Godsacre right away, though. She dawdled up and down the streets looking at the merchandise in the store windows. *I can buy all this*, she thought, looking a cluster of mannequins wearing the latest barskimming plastic suits. She paused in front of a travel agent's window. Fares to New New York were a pittance now. She didn't even need the scholarship anymore. She wouldn't be able to tell Elizabeth where she had gone, but some day she would be a famous performer and people would buy discs to pretend to be her up there with the London Philharmonic. Then she would fly Elizabeth to a performance and sit her right there in the front row where she could see up close how well Gracie had turned out.

Gracie struck a dramatic pose and admired herself in the window. She would call herself just "Grace" and Jacob would make up silly last names to tell to the press. Jacob...

Gracie stopped her preening. There would be no Jacob; none of the heads in New New York. She wouldn't be able to see her family every Sunday to tell them about her classes and how hard the pieces were that she had mastered. No one would push their buttons and talk to them

because nobody except Gracie cared anymore. *I can't go yet* she thought. The money would keep; in fact she knew how to make it grow! She could go anytime at all. She headed back to the Godsacre at a trot.

She went straight to Mr. Shaeffer and punched him on, leaving the rest of her family off, something she had never done before. Mr. Shaeffer blinked and flickered, then fixed his eyes on Gracie.

"Dammit Gracie, I told you to..."

Gracie interrupted quickly. "I did it, Mr. Shaeffer. I have the money. I had to come back. Don't be mad." She smiled timidly.

"Gracie, you're a fool. This wasn't the plan. He'll find you for sure."

Mr. Shaeffer buzzed and flared and then his screen went black. Gracie frantically pushed his button but there was no response.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Shaeffer, I didn't mean to use you up." Gracie choked on sobs. She would have to turn the others on and tell them.

She reached for Mrs. Davney's button, but stopped when she heard a noise from outside. It sounded like the clink of metal against metal. The Godsacre gates were locked at sundown and even a passcard wouldn't open them, so it couldn't be a legitimate mourner out there.

*Mr. Shaeffer was right again*, she thought wryly and turning, raised her arms in front of her face and plunged through the stained glass window at the back of the crypt. She landed in a pool of colored glass and was up and running, ignoring the cuts on her arms and legs.

There was a high pitched buzz past her face and something tugged at her

ear. She felt warm blood run down her neck but there was no time to worry whether or not she still had an ear left.

Gracie pelted down the rows of markers, zigging and zagging at random. A vid screen to her left exploded in a shower of glass and Gracie dived forward. She scrambled through some bushes and half rolled, half tumbled into the overgrown drainage ditch that ran through one corner of the Godsacre.

There was a tunnel made by skunks that was barely wide enough to let Gracie squeeze through. The bushes hissed behind her as her assailant fired randomly into the scrub. Gracie squirmed quickly on her elbows until she reached the grate. She pulled it up with difficulty and mentally cursed herself for not checking all her bolt holes more regularly. She slid through the grate, her fifteen-year-old body getting jammed the way her eleven-year-old one never had.

She dropped to the floor of the ossuary and reached up to fit the grate back on. Bones turned to power under her feet as she dashed to the entrance. The Godsacre caretakers had put a new chain and padlock on the gate during their yearly inspection but Gracie kept a bolt-cutter inside the ossuary for just that purpose. She cut the chain and caught it before it could hit the ground. She remembered how much the gates creaked so she just opened them enough to ease her body out. She stood quietly, straining her senses in the pitch dark. She closed her eyes to hear better, so she sensed rather than saw the blow.

She spun to the side so the heavy flashlight came down on her shoulder

rather than on the top of her head. Half bent from pain, she scuttled away toward some markers. In desperation, she slapped at their activation buttons as she passed. The ones that came on were puzzled and called out into the darkness for their visitors to identify themselves.

Gracie shouted as she ran: "I'm in trouble, guys. He's after me."

The heads that heard her passed on the word to those that hadn't. As her pursuer ran by them, they heaped abuse on him. Gracie made sure she activated Robbie Thorn's mega screen, which portrayed the deceased from head to toe. Robbie had been a big Elvis fan and had chosen to be portrayed as the "Old Elvis," white jumpsuit and all.

She heard her pursuer's exclamation of shock from behind her and grinned unpleasantly. He lost even more time by pausing to shoot Robbie's screen.

Gracie stopped hitting buttons to keep him from tracking her progress. There were enough screens on to raise a cacophony that might even be heard as far as the street, but Gracie couldn't count on a cop coming in time.

She could see the man's silhouette as he ran in front of a row of lit vid screens and confirmed that it was indeed Higgins who was trying to kill her. *Learned the hard way to do his own dirty work, didn't he?* she thought contemptuously.

She ran to the mausoleum at the very end of the row. Peter Norris III had paid a lot of money for his mausoleum, which was a shame because the water table was only a few feet below the ground in that particular

section of the Godsacre.

As soon as she opened the door, she was enveloped in dampness. Norris III had placed his vid in a subcrypt that was reached by descending a short flight of stairs. The moisture had seeped in through the cement and the stairs were coated with slime. From the top of the stairs, Gracie could see Norris III's vid. She hefted the rock that she had picked up outside. It was a tough shot and her shoulder was quite badly bruised. She let fly, and the rock hit the button smack on, just as if all her practicing had been yesterday and not four years ago. Peter Norris III popped into existence.

"You little gutter rat! I told you never to hit my button. I swear I will complain to the authorities. It's beyond me why they let dirty filthy children run around my Godsacre. I paid good money...where are you, you little scag?"

Gracie hid behind the huge decorative urn, one of a pair that framed the entrance to the stairs. Higgins burst into the mausoleum and heard Norris III's ranting. He looked a trifle dazed and his hair was in an amazing state of disarray. He charged down the stairs and his Gucci-clad feet hit the slime.

The resulting tumble was quite spectacular, but may not have been enough to break his neck. Fortunately, the jagged pieces of wrought-iron fence that Gracie had braced against the bottom of the stairs ensured that Higgins would not be leaving the mausoleum. He only screamed for a short while, and that noise was cut off when Gracie shut the outer door behind her. Norris III

had not had any visitors in all the time Gracie had been living in the Godsacre, so Mr. Higgins should rest undisturbed for many years.

Gracie ran back to her mausoleum, frightened that Higgins may have had some time to damage the heads. She breathed a sigh of relief as she saw the intact screens. She reached out to push Mrs. Davney on, but hesitated. What would she tell Mrs. Davney? That she was now a millionaire murderess? Poor Mrs. Davney's circuits would overheat for certain. Mrs. Perryman and Mr. Ellis would not fare much better. To her surprise, Gracie didn't really want to talk to any of them. She felt as if she had aged a hundred years since she had left the mausoleum that afternoon. She patted Mrs. Davney's screen affectionately. She would leave a note for the caretaker telling him that the broken stained glass window needed to be boarded up or else the heads would get wet in the next rainstorm. She would send money from New New York to pay for a new window. Gracie recovered her violin from its hiding place. There was one thing left to do, and it was the hardest too.

She knelt in front of Jacob's crypt and pushed the button. His image flicked onto the screen and he frowned at her, his lips pursed together.

"Damn it, Jacob, don't be like that. I'm really going this time. I am going to New New York, to the Musicians' Academy. When I am famous, I'm going to have a big house on an island. Then I'm going to buy your marker from your relatives and have you shipped to my island. Then we

can be together all the time. It's going to be great, Jacob, believe me."


Jacob's eyes were fixed on a point past her shoulder and his lips remained firmly sealed. Gracie clenched her fists to hit the top of the vid screen but checked herself abruptly. The old mechanism probably couldn't take such a beating.

"C'mon, Jacob. Don't be so stubborn. I'm doing what you and Mr. Shaeffer wanted but don't think I'm going to give you up. I'll come for you some day."

She paused hopefully, and the

image deliberately closed its eyes. Her expression hardened and she cried a few angry tears. She heard the shrill of sirens in the distance. Someone must have heard the disturbance. The last thing she wanted now was to be found in the Godsacre by the cops.

"Fine, Jacob, have it your way." Gracie didn't spare another glance at the crypt's screen and strode off purposefully toward the Godsacre gates.

She didn't hear the soft "Goodbye, Gracie," from the dimming screen behind her. 

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:** LESLIE BROWN is a research technician delving into the mysteries of the brain at the National Research Council in Ottawa. With the purchase of a home computer, there were no longer any excuses not to write. This is her first published story.

**ABOUT THE ARTIST:** Please see page 42.

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# The Vergers: First Story

fiona heath

*illustrated by James Beveridge*

*Carole MacIntosh and Alfonzo Smith were the first Vergers. The Vergers did not put up monuments to them, or turn their birthdays into holidays, or develop legends about them. Carole and Alfonzo were talked about as a fact, in the same way people talked about last Tuesday being wet or last year being a great one for debris. Summer solstice was the night celebrating the beginnings of the Verger culture, but this was merely an excuse for a party. The Vergers revered very little, having no religion. There was a tendency to make obeisances to the sun and moon, due to the limitation of the walls, which forced people to look up for any kind of panoramic view; but on the whole, the Vergers were a quiet culture, as befitted a people discarded by technology.*

It was, at least, a sunny day. The sky was a clear blue and the sun shone warmly, although it was still too early in June for blistering heat. The cars along the 401 warmed up rapidly, between the sun and the 140 kph speeds. Many had their air conditioning on as they barreled along the superhighway between Montreal and Toronto. Carole MacIntosh's little mini Saturn had no air conditioning and the air inside the car was becoming uncomfortably warm. Alfonzo Smith rolled down his window a crack. Air blasted in along with the ferocious roar of the traffic.

"Don't do that," said Carole. "I can't stand the noise."

"But the air in here is stifling. I'll roll it up in a few minutes."

"The air out there isn't much better."

Alfonzo took that to mean yes and left the window down. Friends from working at TotalBank Voiceline in Toronto, Alfonzo had gotten a lift from Carole to Ottawa to visit his sister. Having side by side cubicles helping the riches invest and reinvest their money by phone and computer, and sharing common interests in men, movies, and couch styles, they were comfortable companions. They had spoken very little on the drive home to Toronto as the little red car chugged along the monotonous road.

"It's too bad you couldn't get a later entry time," Alfonzo said for the twentieth time.

"I was lucky to get 12:47. It was a cancellation. Otherwise it would have been 9:22 tonight. You know how hard it is these days. At least we got an early start on Friday."

"I know," said Alfonzo. "It's just not fair. I don't see why entry passes are linked to income."

"They're not linked to income. They're prioritized by reason for travelling. I was visiting friends and that's at the bottom of the list."

"You should have told them it was a job interview. Anyway, I find it suspicious how top executives are doing all their business travel on weekends."

Carole said, "I couldn't prove it was for a job. And how do you know they're all riches?"

"Don't be obtuse, Carole. Just look at the cars coming the other way. We started out seeing cars like ours. Now

that we're getting toward Kingston and it's later in the day, we're starting to see the occasional beamer and van-stans. Who else can afford new cars?"

Carole sighed. She knew Alfonzo was right, that the wealthy people could choose their own time, just by calling up *401 Drives!*, the private company contracted by the Ministry of Automobiles and Roads, and telling them when they were planning on leaving. She suspected some didn't even have to call. It was the eighty percent of the population who were below the poverty line who had to apply a week in advance to get the entry times for the superhighways. It was getting worse. Last year she only had to phone a day before to get a decent time; now it was a week, and that was no guarantee. Carole decided to think about the bar she'd been at in Ottawa, and the blond man with the flashing eyes.

The spluttering of the car as a puff of smoke emerged from the hood jolted them out of their respective reveries. The silence of the engine was overlaid by Carole's "What the..." and Alfonzo's "Oh goddess!"

As Carole pulled sharply on the steering wheel, trying to move the car onto the shoulder, the wheel stopped responding. The Saturn crossed the shoulder and went down into the stretch of grassland that separated the west and east lanes of traffic. Hitting a depression in the ground, the car bucked up into the air and came down pitched steeply forward, then settled solidly on the ground with a loud *whomp*.

Alfonzo stirred first. With a groan, he turned his head toward Carole,



trying to see if it was her or the air bag that was moving.

"Carole?" He reached out a tentative hand, wincing from the movement.

"Carole? Are you okay?"

They spent the afternoon lying in the grass beside the crumpled car, drowsing in the sun, trying not to move too much. They had crashed at a wide part of the median, just past a long stretch of trees and Canadian Shield. It was a wide strip of grassland, perhaps one hundred meters between the two highways. The land sloped gently down from the westbound lanes, creating a sheltered little valley, marred only by the incredible amount of debris scattered about.

"Are you sure this splint will hold my ankle? It feels awfully loose."

"I'm sorry, Carole, it's the best I can do with my hand. I'll be able to tie it tighter tomorrow. I'm sure my wrist is just sprained."

"Tomorrow! But I want to get to a hospital today. Try your cell phone again. It's got to work." Carole's whiny voice contrasted with the sight of her long slim body curled up peacefully in the warm afternoon sun.

"I told you, I maxed out my credit this weekend phoning Rob. They cut me off right when he finally seemed to be hearing my side of things. Multitel won't turn it on until I phone in a credit transfer. And I don't see a pay phone close by, Rolly." The brown-haired man yawned as he stretched out into a more comfortable position. "We're not badly injured. We didn't hurt our heads, we're just banged up a little. We can sleep in the car tonight and maybe get across

around dawn—the traffic will probably be slower then."

Carole didn't answer him, having fallen back asleep.

They slept uncomfortably but warmly with the air bags. Alfonzo got out of the car in the early morning to check the traffic. He came back shaking his head, and they both slept until the sun was high in the sky.

Feeling sore and achy, Carole hobbling gingerly on her broken ankle and Alfonzo holding her arm, they made their way slowly up the grassy incline that hid their car from the traffic. They stood just off the shoulder staring at the cars rushing past.

"I can't believe we were going that fast too," said Carole. She put her hand up to her head to keep her pale blonde curls from being blown into her eyes. "And you said it was faster in the night?"

"The trucks are so large—there wasn't more traffic, but those monster trucks! Twent-two wheels. No way we could make it. I thought the weekdays would be slower, but maybe not. Everyone is in such a hurry these days. The *Refuel-Refresh* isn't too far back. Where the traffic merges—we can try there."

"I don't think I can walk that far. Let's just stay here. I'm sure someone will see us and call in to the police," said Carole as she squinted down the highway toward the service centre.

Alfonzo looked at her in horror. "I didn't think of that. We'd better get back down to the valley. We'll go to the *Refuel* when your ankle is better." He began pulling at the tall woman's arm, moving back into the soft grass.

"What are you talking about? I

want to be rescued! Of course I want someone to see us: we had a car accident, we're hurt, we want to go home." She pulled her arm away from him and began waving at the cars.

Alfonzo grabbed her again, his slightly plump face quivering in alarm. "Carole! Carole! Stop it. You've forgotten. They call the police and the police do an emergency slow-down and see your car we'll be in big shit. We'll have to declare bankruptcy. No way."

Carole stared at him, the blood draining from her face. She turned awkwardly and began to hobble down the slope. Alfonzo took her arm and they moved as quickly as they could away from the 401.

Carole's car was an old 2008 Saturn whose compu features were limited to weather reports and comments on traffic patterns. New cars were equipped with highway automation, following the inputted route, and monitored the speed at all times. New cars were allowed to go twenty kilometers per hour faster and had exclusive use of the inside lane. They almost never broke down, and if they did, the in-car computer prevented them from running into another car, directing the car at open space or stationary objects instead. The middle lane was for cars that had—at minimum—speed control. The red Saturn had neither and was relegated to the farthest lane. However, early starters often used the faster lanes when there were fewer new cars on the road. If the police had to stop traffic and rescue them, and saw that they had been driving illegally, Carole and Alfonzo would be held legally responsible for all the costs incurred by the police

and possibly by the Med-Mart—for having taken undue risk causing injury. TB Voiceline workers were not management; they could not afford the insurance premiums for risk coverage, and would have to sell everything. In cases like this, jobs were usually lost in the process, as the Bigbanks were notoriously conservative about employee behavior.

Carole and Alfonzo had a quiet Monday, sitting by the little red car, reading the books they had with them, and finishing off the last of their sandwiches and snacks. After dozing in the heat, listening to the hum of the crickets, Carole woke up restless and cranky.

"My ankle is throbbing. I want to go home. We have to figure out how to cross. I wish your damn phone worked. Why couldn't you wait until you got back to talk to Rob? You know it's over between you two—why torture yourself?"

"I do not know that it is over," said Alfonzo stiffly.

"He moved out! You only found out where he was by bullying Jennifer. He doesn't want to be with you anymore. Why couldn't you just accept it? Then we wouldn't be stuck." Carole turned over on her side, facing away from Alfonzo.

"Just because you've been alone for forever and a day, don't be mad at me for trying to work things out," Alfonzo snapped. "Who are you going to call, anyway? 401 Drives!? They'd just call the police and you'd never be allowed on the highway again."

"Right now it feel likes I'll never leave this goddamn grassy verge,"

Carole yelled. Alfonzo didn't reply. Carole looked at the sturdy young man, who was staring icily into the distance, and started to whimper, her blue eyes filling with tears of frustration. After a minute, Alfonzo sighed and moved over beside her, putting his arm around her. She turned into his shoulder, snuffling, "I'm sorry, Fonzo. I didn't mean to be mean. I know you really loved Rob. He doesn't deserve you. I just want to get out of here."

Alfonzo sighed. "I know. It's okay. I'm sorry too. I have to try with Rob, that's all. And I guess I just kind of liked today. You don't notice the cars after a while, and it's so peaceful, sitting here in the sunshine, reading and sleeping. I'm so relaxed I don't even care about getting out of here."

Carole laughed, somewhat bitterly. "Listen to the country boy! The only fresh air you used to like came in a canister at the oxygen bar on Queen. Since when have you been into just lazing about?"

"I know it sounds strange. I didn't know what I was missing. I've never been out of cities except for that resort in Bermuda." Alfonzo looked steadily at Carole. "This has been a really nice day. No headache from squinting at teeny tiny numbers on a computer for hours, helping riches throw their money around."

Carole retorted, "We'll have headaches from hunger instead." She looked up at the puffy white clouds hanging lazily in the sky and relented. "It has been pleasant. I never seem to have the time to hang out like this in Toronto."

Alfonzo laughed. "Rolly, honey, there is no place to do this in Toronto!

When was the last time you could afford High Park?" High Park, like all parks, was fenced in and charged an admission in order to maintain itself. Only the riches could afford to visit greenspace regularly.

Carole had to smile. "Well, one day when I'm a rich, maybe I'll own a house with a backyard." She sat up and stretched. "Tomorrow, if we tighten the bandage on my foot, I'll try to make it to the *Refuel*. By then, we'll be too hungry for any more lounging around."

The next morning both complained of hunger pangs. Carole found a stick and they moved slowly through the swaying grass toward the glistening white *Refuel-Refresh* center a few kilometers away. The day was warm and sunny and Carole began to feel slightly cheerful as they walked past mats of spring violets and tiny daisies. They passed a swampy pond as they entered a grove of trees. They pushed their way through the underbrush, Alfonzo wincing as he used his sprained right wrist to push aside branches and move logs. Carole chatted. She chatted about the upcoming Voiceliners night at Black's Theatre to see a musical version of *The Golfing Premier*. She chatted about repainting her one-room apartment and the latest CD soap opera, *Enhancers*, about management at a Tokyo-based conglomerate. Alfonzo was quiet, listening the sounds of the traffic, watching the road through gaps in the trees. By the time the two arrived in a break in the woods, across from the sprawling *Refuel-Refresh*, Carole was acting as though they would cross right away and be saved. Alfonzo was reaching

a different realization.

Carole looked around the small grassy space. "All this litter, it's disgusting. At least workfarers keep the other side clean. The riches are pigs—throwing all this trash out. Look, some of it's barely eaten." She picked up a chocolate bar still in its wrapper with only one bite taken out of it. "Thank goddess we're out of here."

"Good thing municipalities charge by the pound for waste. Quite the incentive to get rid of what you don't want before you get off the highway. The pickings are probably even better toward Gananoque. I bet we could cull enough food to survive," said Alfonzo as he stared at the traffic. He gently took the chocolate bar from Carole's hand. He carefully crumbled off the chewed end and broke it in two. Putting one piece in his mouth, chewing it deliberately, he held out the other half to Carole.

She slapped his hand away, dropping the chocolate onto the gravel. "Don't! Don't! Are you nuts? We'll die out here! Eating garbage! Don't you want to go home? There will be a break in the traffic. There will. It's slower here, can't you tell? Or we'll just flag someone down. I don't care if they call the police! So what if I lose everything? The car was my only asset." Carole tried to move out onto the shoulder, wincing as she put pressure on her ankle.

Alfonzo grabbed her before she fell, pulling her back into the shelter of the trees. "Carole, think about what you're saying! We'd go back to bankruptcy and no jobs. TB will lose us the second we're on the vidnet. 'Voice-liners cause 401 slow down. 401 Drives! loses millions. Car unsafe.

Couple will be charged.' No jobs, Carole. No Bigbank would hire us again and I'm not qualified to do anything else. Even if, by some miracle, we got into a retraining course, which as criminals we wouldn't, we'd have no money to pay for it. No money. Do you really want to be one of those workfarers picking garbage off the roadside?"

Carole slumped against a tree, crying. "And this is better? Eating garbage instead of cleaning it up?"

"We can't get across the traffic, Rolly. It's too fast." Carole continued to cry. "Look, let's just pick up some food to eat. Just for now. Then we'll try for that bridge—the one farther west. Maybe we can get some kids to let down a rope or something. Come on, honey, we'll figure some way out of here. Let's just be cautious, that's all. Take a little bit longer so we don't do ourselves any more damage. Pretend this is the holiday you never had."

There was no one on the great grey bridge. They could see the occasional big truck above the concrete sides of the bridge, and catch glimpses of the cars whizzing past, but saw no people. Once they thought they heard cyclists, hidden from view by the sides, but no one responded to their screams. They spent the nights scavenging the shoulders for food, finding half-eaten bags of chips, apples with only a few bites taken out, and the occasional sandwich still in plastic. Drinks were the most scarce. They found the occasional bottle of juice or water, but subsisted largely on the dregs of pop bottles.

Alfonzo spent his time wandering



up and down the median, looking through the piles of debris that decorated the grassland, or staring at the vivid and shiny cars as they flashed past. Carole became more and more quiet, unlike her usual cheerful and talkative self, spending much of her time huddled under an old truck cab, protected from the cool rainy days that had descended after the first days of heat and sun.

"Let's go back to the car," she said early one morning after they had been there a few days. "It's obvious no one walks anywhere in this goddess-forsaken place. I want to wear clean clothes. I want to wash my hair. I'm tired of feeling filthy." They had left most of their stuff in the car, unable to carry much because of their injuries.

"What about your ankle? Has the swelling gone down? It took us a day to get here—do you really want to put that much pressure on it?" asked Alfonzo.

"My ankle's much better. I want to go back to my car," snapped Carole. She smacked her pale hand on the truck cab. Alfonzo jumped as the brittle old plastic cracked. Carole went on, "What do you care anyway? You'd be happy if we never left this garbage dump! I want to be back in Toronto. I want to get up and take the subway to work. I want to sit in my cubicle and listen to the riches complain. I want to work out. I want to hang out in bars with my friends. I don't want to be in the middle of nowhere without a building in sight. I'm not a fucking enviro! This is not my idea of a good time. I want my life back!" Carole was screaming by now, hobbling toward Alfonzo, using her extra height to intimidate him, despite

her unsteady walk. "Are you some kind of crazy closet earther? Do you really believe that hanging out eating garbage is a wise career move? Or is this some warped slow suicide attempt over that loser Rob? 'Cause if it is, count me out!"

Alfonzo stopped moving away, looking warily at the panting woman. He took a deep breath. "Look, Carole, do you really think your life in Toronto was so terrific? Truly and honestly? I've heard you complain a million times about how bored you are. What's so great about spending the next twenty years working at Voiceline and going for a virtual-swim four nights a week? Don't you want to do more than hang out with Voiceliners for the rest of your life? Don't you ever get lonely—especially with your mum dead and your dad living in Florida with a woman younger than you? Tony's been gone for years. Even if you did meet someone new, you don't have the savings needed to certify a legal marriage. Why do you think your car was such an old stinker, Carole? It was all you could afford! And all you'll ever be able to afford at Voiceline."

Carole stared at him, surprised by the anger in him. Alfonzo continued passionately, "We've both been Voiceliners for five years; you know what that means. If you don't get promoted in the first year, you're there for life. Do you really want to turn out like Tiffany? Do you want to be celebrating twenty years as a Voiceliner while you're in treatment for bone cancer? Alone in a tiny box of an apartment that you don't even own?"

"Shut up! Just shut up!" Carole pushed Alfonzo in the chest. He

stumbled backwards as she turned away, trying to move quickly. Her ankle gave out and she stumbled awkwardly, ending up in a heap on the damp ground.

Alfonzo recovered and stood above her, looking at her compassionately. After a loud silence, he said, "Oh Carole, it's not just your life. Look at mine. Thirty-three and the latest of my lovers just walked out. My life is going nowhere fast. At least you had a car—you could get out of the city—all I have my vertainment system. And I'll be paying that off for years. I just can't stand it anymore. You don't know how much I hate going to work. Every day on the streetcar, I fantasize about arriving downtown and finding our building in flames or that the Bigbank has gone down in a merger and we're getting huge severance packages. It's awful work, Carole, it really is. Not just the dinky cubicles and the constant buzz buzz in your ear, but the work. Helping riches move their money around—making money, losing money, losing more than I make in a year without even blinking an eye...

"Didn't you ever dream about screwing an account around? 'I'm sorry, Mr. Thomas, you've lost thirty million dollars... I'm sure you said put it in Hard Copy Publishing, sir. I thought it was a strange choice, but it is your money, I'm not qualified to judge... You said Harpo Productions? The media conglomerate out of Chicago... Yes sir, that would have been a wise move... No, I'm sorry Mr. Thomas, sir, there is nothing we can do... Thirty million, yes sir, that is a lot of money... All your assets, sir? Sorry to hear that.' "

Carole sat up slowly, turning to face Alfonzo, but looking past him up at the blue sky that was appearing through rapidly fading clouds. "Yes, I guess I do dream of messing up accounts. Too bad the required minimum to invest is so far out of reach. We'd be riches in a day otherwise." Carole focused on the short, plump man above her, who was now looking anxiously at her. She said bleakly, "But Alfonzo, you could just leave Voiceline. Don't you think this is a little extreme?"

"And do what? Work for another Bigbank doing the same thing? I can't afford to leave Toronto—we make enough to live there, but that's it. Everything costs so much. No savings, no assets. And no skills."

"You make it sound so bad. It's not that bad," said Carole, unconvincedly, as she got up from the grass. Alfonzo handed her a stick to lean on.

"It is that bad, Carole. Really."

They walked slowly through the lush grass that was reaching past their knees, heading back up the verge to the crumpled red car, now their marker of home. The sun's warmth, no longer hidden by clouds, began to penetrate their damp skins. The pale scents of Queen Anne's lace and buttercups tinged the air. The median smelt clean and fresh. Crickets fell silent as they passed by. Neither one said anything.

As June turned into the heat of July, both became browner, thinner, and quieter. Carole and Alfonzo talked very little about the future beyond the next day. They had long given up on the slowing down of traffic. There were always cars on the road, and the

road seemed to be getting more crowded every day. Not that they paid much attention to the traffic: it became both the barrier they chose to ignore and a quickly assimilated background noise. They spent their days walking through the grass or the woods, or simply lying and sleeping in the sun, always returning to be near the car at night. They would spend hours at night marveling at all the stars in the sky, half-remembering names and making up new ones.

Sometimes they camped out in the woods in front of the service center to gather more chocolate bars, doughnuts, and salads. They only ate meat if they saw it being thrown out the window. While the traffic was still too heavy to cross at the *Refuel*, the cars were slightly slower and children began to notice the two suntanned people in dirty clothes wandering along the side of the road. The first one threw a bag of unopened chips. The next threw a three-quarters-full bottle of water, a treasure they hoarded carefully.

By the end of July, they had stopped talking about returning to Toronto. No cars ever stopped. The few police cars on the road sped by like all the rest. If people were searching for them, they never heard about it on the car's solar-powered radio. Their conversation became observational, noting the different kinds of wildflowers, the delicate shades of green on the tree leaves, which plastics became brittle and which stayed sturdy, and identifying the types of clouds in the sky. Carole, who had grown up in the Toronto suburb of Cambridge, began to recall the forgotten names of trees and flowers. She

spotted fiddlehead ferns in the woods and chickweed and chicory among the grasses, recognizing them as edible. They tried eating dandelion leaves, and quickly learned that the older leaves were too bitter to eat; only the fresh new leaves were edible.

In late August, Carole began collecting fallen branches from the woods. Alfonso began gathering the larger pieces of car casings that were strewn along the grassland. They had already tidied up the grassland around the car, creating a small living area with logs and plastic crates. Now they began sifting through the litter of paper, clothing, car pieces, and plastic that covered much of the verge, looking for useful items for the upcoming winter. Alfonso made a pile of good clothing, most of which came from a large suitcase they found on a day excursion to the Canadian Shield past the *Refuel-Refresh* Center.

Alfonzo came back from a walk, carrying a large sheet of plastic that looked like it had once covered a couch. He dropped it beside Carole, who was sitting on a bucket, examining an old laptop computer. "That old truck cab down by the woods looks like a good place."

Carole detached the screen of the computer, placing the rest on the ground. "This makes a good tray. Nice and flat. It can even be a mirror when the sun is in the right direction... There's the big green car by that truck cab. If we take the Saturn's solar panel and battery, we could use the car and its heater too."

Alfonzo stretched out on the grass. "One good thing about global warming: we'll only have a couple of cold snaps."



"I found another boot yesterday. I think it might fit you. Even has a lining."

"Food's picking up, too. I found three boxes of breakfast bars yesterday. And a can of apple juice. It's almost as if kids get in the car ready to throw stuff to us. I suppose some of them could be regular travelers."

"It's going to be a good winter." Carole smiled at Alfonzo. "The first good snow, let's make a snow fort."

Carole MacIntosh and Alfonzo Smith were the first Vergers. The Vergers did not put up monuments to them, or turn their birthdays into holidays, or

develop legends about them. Carole and Alfonzo were talked about as a fact, in the same way people talked about last Tuesday being wet or last year being a great one for debris. Summer solstice was the night celebrating the beginnings of the Verger culture, but this was merely an excuse for a party. The Vergers revered very little, having no religion. There was a tendency to make obeisances to the sun and moon, due to the limitation of the walls, which forced people to look up for any kind of panoramic view; but on the whole, the Vergers were a quiet culture, as befitted a people discarded by technology. 🍁

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:** FIONA HEATH lives in Waterloo, Ontario, where she spends her time parenting and writing. This story came to her during a weekend road trip. This is her second appearance in *On Spec* ("Casserole Diplomacy," in our Spring 1997 issue, won the Lydia Langstaff Memorial Prize).

**ABOUT THE ARTIST:** JAMES BEVERIDGE (please see page 6).



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